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THE LONE STAR GAMBLER; or, THE MAID of the MAGNOLIAS.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM"—Major Sam S. Hall,

AUTHOR OF "DARK DASHWOOD," "WILD WILL, THE MAD RANCHERO," "KIT CARSON, JR.," ETC., ETC., ETC.



NEARER AND NEARER CAME THE FIRE, UNTIL ITS HEAT WAS ACTUALLY GROWING PAINFUL, AND WITH A GLANCE INTO THE PROSPECT AHEAD OF HIM, THE SCOUT GAVE HIMSELF UP FOR LOST.

The Lone Star Gambler:
OR,
The Maid of the Magnolias.

A Romance of Texan Mystery.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM,"

(MAJOR SAM S. HALL.)

AUTHOR OF "KIT CARSON, JR.," "WILD WILL,"
"DARK DASHWOOD," "THE BLACK
BRAVO," "THE TERRIBLE
TONKAWAY," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A YOUNG MAN'S FANCY.

SOME five years previous to the breaking out of our civil war there stood, about a quarter of a mile from the generally placid but oft raging waters of the Mexican Gulf, and not far from the mouth of the Rio Brazos, a grand and most beautiful mansion, with grounds and gardens that perfectly corresponded.

The structure was of wood, and was surrounded by a vast expanse of ornamental trees and shrubbery, having, however, from its front an unobstructed view of the Gulf, where, from its wide veranda one could gaze out upon the far-stretching deep at times when sea and sky seemed to blend together in one harmonious whole of peace and quiet, and banishing all trace of the horizon line. At others, when the white-capped and mountainous waves dashed over the black and forbidding rocks below, seeming, in the wild, strange and appalling light of the tempest, like furious demons ever changing their hideous forms and struggling with each other in a desperate death conflict, which ended in each and all being hurled to death upon the jagged breakers. Sitting and watching the war of elements, one would almost inevitably be led to picture the dark and unfathomable mystery of the caves of the ocean which, since sea and land assumed their respective places at the vanishing of night and chaos, has defied the investigations of science, and that now seemed to deepen from a mystery to a fearful curse—an anathema upon all who strove to become its masters and controllers.

Between the lordly mansion and the beach was a graduated slope, over which grew and flourished in prodigal luxuriance an immense variety of tropical flowers, plants and delicious fruits. From this a perfect labyrinth of white-shelled paths, bordered with box of the deepest emerald, wound here and there amid the fragrant and brilliant-hued flora. To the north and south of the princely dwelling these many and devious paths extended, and leading here and there beneath the dense cool shades of the gigantic magnolias, whose heavy perfume filled the air. Beyond this, and stretching apparently for miles, was an immense natural-wooded park, traversed by curving drives and bridle-paths, with shaded promenades and open sunny lawns. A miniature lake, nearly circular in form, adorned its center; and from it narrow walks diverged to different points in the main carriage-drives, while one, more strongly marked than the others, led to the front entrance of the mansion itself, where a large gate was ever found to stand hospitably open.

To the north and scarcely more than a rifle shot from the house, were two long rows of small white-washed dwellings. These were the slave quarters of the estate, and a little village in themselves.

To the rear of the negro cabins were the stables, and beyond these stretched the usual vast and almost limitless fields of cotton and corn; everything, in and around the plantation, speaking of untiring energy and thrift, of great wealth, and of almost Oriental luxury.

If any man in the world had cause to be contented and happy, judging from outward appearances and surroundings, that man was Colonel Lafayette Carbury, sole owner of this princely estate. Many, doubtless, thought him so, but only because they fancied that they would be so were they in his place. But Lafayette Carbury's happiness, if it ever visited him, was not expressed in his countenance, or by laugh or speech; for, to speak truthfully, he was, when not "in his cups," somewhat morose and surly. He had a pretty vigorous penchant for wine and fast horses,

and, rumor had it, was somewhat strongly given to games of chance.

He was a handsome man—but the Carburys, we would be told, had always been that—of the average height, and possibly a trifle above it, erect, and with rather an imperious bearing, which was increased by the heavy eyebrows of purest white, which hung over his bright and searching eyes of the keenest black; while his pointed, military beard matched both face and figure, and completed the *ensemble*.

Such was Colonel Carbury at three-score years.

His family consisted of himself, wife, and two children—a boy and a girl.

His son, James Carbury, a young man of twenty, was, like nearly all sons of wealthy planters of that day, wild as a hawk. Since his return from college, where he had by no means distinguished himself, in an academic sense, he had spent the greater part of his time in gaming, boating, horse-racing, and carousing; his companions, as in most cases of the kind, being a set of young men who were much beneath him in station and education. His face was, in some respects, a singularly attractive one. Though hardly of that description which compels respect and confidence at a glance, it was, nevertheless, one the sight of which would make many a susceptible female heart beat the quicker.

Neither particularly intelligent nor refined in its expression, and with an evident dash of pride and willfulness in the finely-cut features, there was a magnetism which many found themselves unable to resist. His hair, tawny in hue, and of a shade that was deeper than the amber-colored mustache, in its careless arrangement, had a look which seemed to speak of the owner's knowledge of its becomingness. His sleepy, dark violet eyes, almost fierce at times, had in their unknown depths some latent force of good or evil, some undeveloped sub-stratum which the future might, or might not, bring to the view and inspection of the world.

Cora Carbury, the sole daughter of the house, was the one bright particular star of the little constellation. She was as fair as the midsummer dream of the poet; with long, wavy, golden hair, blue eyes, and a complexion that rivaled the blush of the bursting bud of the prairie rose.

She was little more than fair fourteen at the time of which we write, but in her sunny natal clime, she had in those few brief years nearly developed into womanhood.

Watching, unseen, this young girl, with her soft, rounded arms folded upon the windowsill before her, while her guileless blue eyes gazed out upon the sunset sky, the vivid hues of which in their gorgeous opal seemed reflected in faint delicious tints on her fair cheek—with even this distant view of Cora Carbury's rare, childish beauty, one could scarce refrain from giving utterance involuntarily to an exclamation of surprise and pleasure.

Free and joyous as a bird was Cora; at times galloping upon her pinto pony for miles over the surrounding country; at others paddling her tiny boat over the waters of a wide, shallow bayou that was adjacent to her home, or sitting solitary upon the surge-spattered beach, and singing to the sea-gulls as they skimmed the water, or swooped low, in their fearless flight over her gold-crowned head.

She was a girl whom to see was instantly to admire; to know, was surely and steadily to love. Young in years though she was, her charms of mind were no less than her graces of person, and the two made up a rare and beautiful commingling that was well-nigh perfection. Admiring, as all did, the glowing present in her face and form, the thoughts turned invariably to the promise of a still more glorious future—a time when the sweet opening rose of the morning-tide would be the "queen lily and rose in one" of the noonday.

The mistress of the mansion, Colonel Carbury's wife, was, and had been for some time, in ill-health, being confined, for the greater portion of the time, to the house, and indeed frequently to her apartment.

Across the bayou, and about a mile from the boundaries of Magnolia Plantation—as the home of the Carburys was called—resided a wealthy widow lady, who had a son now in his eighteenth year. We have said that she was wealthy; the remark might and ought to be amended by saying that she was generally so considered.

The husband of Mrs. Adelaide Adler had, in

his lifetime, the reputation of being one of the richest men in that portion of the Lone Star State; but at his death it was found in settling up his affairs, that the estate was deeply involved, and a number of the slaves had then to be disposed of to satisfy the most clamorous of his creditors.

But appearances go a great way, and the Adler mansion was as attractive and superb a residence, in nearly every respect, as that of the Carburys, and the landed estate was quite as large and valuable as Magnolia Plantation; but having, after the decease of her husband, and the adjustment of his affairs of which mention has been made, but few negroes comparatively remaining, Mrs. Adler was, in consequence, unable to carry on planting as extensively as heretofore, and her fields were now, many of them, filled only with rank weeds and grass, where once the snow-white cotton bolls hung thickly, and the tall golden corn waved in the balmy breeze from the Gulf.

The lady herself, much stricken with grief at the loss of a husband to whom she had been devotedly attached, seldom visited, and consequently neither she nor her affairs were often mentioned by the neighboring gentry. In fact, though still blooming, and on the eastern side of forty, Mrs. Adler dropped, not gradually, but at once, from the select circle in which she had till lately moved and shone.

In this way she seemed compelled to lead a life very much that of a recluse; the residences of the planters, at that time and place, being, generally speaking, many miles apart.

One comfort, one solace, the lonely widow might have had; and, to some extent, she did have. But Adelaide Adler did not understand, and therefore could hardly be said to know her own son. And yet she was a fond mother in her way; at times fiercely, and, as she believed, passionately in her demonstrative fondness for her boy. She had fire, passion, force, and an abundance of a certain kind of cleverness in her composition; but in genuine high principle and true nobility of soul, she was badly lacking.

Charles Adler was of a modest, retiring disposition, and more devoted to his studies than any other pursuit. He was more favorably situated in this respect than might be imagined, for the old family library contained a goodly store of standard works, that had been brought from Kentucky when the elder Adler "pulled up stakes" in the "dark and bloody ground," and located in Texas, at a time when the Lone Star Flag waved over the settled portion of the infant Republic.

Often would young Adler, with some favorite volume under his arm, roam to the shore of bayou or Gulf, climb up some huge oak or grandiflora, and there sit, shrouded from the burning sun by the dense vails of hanging Spanish moss and read and dream the long sleepy afternoons away. Occasionally he would glance up from the page, and his eye would wander listlessly for a time along the low stretch of yellow sand that formed the soft border to the gorgeous malachite of the Mexique. Far out in the distance lay the green and glassy water. The waves rose with a gentle murmur, and anon fell with a low, musical ripple. The sky, as "day's golden death" drew nearer, was all afame with the most beautiful colors. But, although the youth's whole soul was fully attuned to the melody of sound and color, neither of them made any impression upon him. Not once would his eyes rest meaningfully upon either sea or sky; not once would he seem to arouse himself that he might listen to the faint music of wind and wave.

It was in the better days, which so soon had faded, previous to the death of his father, that, children though they were, Charles Adler and Cora Carbury had often met. In those days, and it was little different later on, the little golden-haired sprite would roam the woods in search of rare wild-flowers, chase the gaudy-winged butterflies, or laughingly lave her tiny, pearl-tinted feet in the advancing waves of the Gulf upon the gently-sloping beach as the tides came lazily in of a calm day.

These meetings became more frequent, as the two grew older, and as Charles Adler was now a handsome, accomplished, graceful and well-formed youth, a juvenile Apollo in her eyes, and devoted to every whim, while he was ever attention itself to her slightest want, it was not to be wondered at that Cora grew to love him; neither was it strange that she became to him the one bright, pure angel of

his dreams, 'by day and night'. Propinquity, by itself, is potent always in bringing about just such a state of things, and in this case, it was largely aided and abetted by the attractions on either side.

They were too young for words and professions of love, and yet, with the boy, it was a constant struggle to restrain from telling his child idol how fondly she was worshiped. But Cora seemed to expect nothing of the kind. Smiles and glances on both sides had already spoken, and it might have marred the beauty of the picture and struck a discordant note in the love-song, had he done so. For thus it was. Neither was happy, except when in company with the other; and that, although no confession of love had ever passed between them, save only in the tell-tale, melting glances of the eye, which, in their case—if not in all cases—are more pointed, eloquent and truthful, than even the most meaning words.

CHAPTER II.

A MOTHER'S THREAT.

THE heads of the Carbury and Adler families had been enemies for years. Long ago, a dispute in regard to a boundary line between the plantations brought on a suit at law, and this was decided adverse to Colonel Carbury.

To such an extent did this exasperate the somewhat irascible gentleman, that he grossly insulted his successful competitor in public, and that in so humiliating a manner that Mr. Adler, smarting under the insult, felt obliged to challenge him.

A meeting was accordingly arranged, and both men were wounded at the first fire; they recovered, however, and from that time remained enemies though avoiding each other as much as possible.

This most unpleasant affair occurred some years previous to the death of Mr. Adler, and at a time when Cora and Charles were very young; but, children though they were, both had been warned by their respective parents, that they must no longer, when they met, recognize each other.

Love, it is said, laughs at law and locksmiths, and it is to be presumed, this is not exclusively confined to an attack of the malady at mature age. Even boy and girl love looks upon all matters not closely connected with its all-absorbing self, as too utterly unimportant to be worthy of notice. So it was that the children of these implacable foes, though they did not meet as frequently as before, did, notwithstanding, continue to bask now and then in each other's smiles. Unknown to those in authority over them, they would wander, hand in hand, upon the sands on the Gulf shore, and sit, side by side, beneath the fragrant magnolias. Oft and long-continued were these interviews, which, though scarcely stolen ones, were, nevertheless, without either the knowledge or consent of their parents.

Thus matters stood at the opening of our story—Colonel Carbury, though his old enemy now lay in his quiet grave, not only held a most unjust and ungentlemanly spite against his widow, on account of his hostile meeting with her late husband and the trouble which had preceded and led to it, but looked upon her with a feeling that was akin to contempt, because pecuniary matters were not as flourishing with her as formerly. It annoyed him, because, having been forced for want of adequate labor to let a portion of her plantation go to rack and ruin, she had thus—though from no fault of hers—depreciated the value of his own broad acres should he at any time desire to dispose of them.

More than this, he considered Charles Adler as never likely to be more or better than a worthless book-worm; and would doubtless have thought better of him had he sported, drank, and gamed, like the illustrious scion of his own house.

Charles well knew the state of things, past and present, and, boy though he was, could picture to himself the future.

He knew perfectly well that the haughty and vindictive old colonel would infinitely prefer, in his blind and wicked prejudice, to see his child a corpse at his feet, than wedded to the son of the man whom he hated, though dead. But, in spite of all this, the boy was continually forming plans in his own mind to break down the barrier of pride and hatred between the two families, and was forever building castles in the air for Cora and himself.

Adelaide Adler had reared her son in luxury, and had given him no education by which he

might, in an emergency, gain his own livelihood. Often and often had he endeavored to persuade her to dispose of her immense tract of worse than useless land, retire into the interior of the State, and there invest in cheap lands, as well as stock; but the lady, accustomed to manage her own affairs, refused most decidedly to permit the estate to go out of her hands, giving as an explanation that they had enough land under cultivation as it was, and a sufficient number of slaves remaining, to procure for them all the support that they might require, and indeed to furnish all reasonable luxuries, as long as either of them might live.

Mrs. Adler was indeed much to be pitied; for she had suffered, not only a sad bereavement, but very great injustice. So much so, that it was little wonder if she hated the name of Carbury. Her great anxiety and distress of mind during the dangerous illness of her husband, which ensued upon his duel with the colonel, was now ever present with her; and, along with this, was the knowledge that the latter had cruelly and vindictively caused many of her former friends to desert her in the hour of her greatest grief, when the partner of her joys and sorrows was at last torn from her side by death. All this had imbibed her, and she cared not to conceal her real sentiments.

But, sad to say, it was the cause of the gradual alienating of her son from her affections; for he was never weary in his sounding the praises of Cora Carbury in her ears, while, as often, she warned him against thinking for a moment of an alliance with the house of her father's enemy and her own.

"A Carbury and an Adler can never mate, Charles," she said one day, as the subject came up for the hundredth time. "There is a dark stream of blood between the two families; and, if you persist in meeting that frivolous, hoydenish girl, Cora, there will be more blood shed before it is done with. Mark my words, boy. Good heavens! I should expect your father's ghost to arise from his grave among the magnolias, if you walked past his resting-place with a Carbury by your side!"

"The days of that kind of superstition are past and gone, mother; at least, they ought to be, with educated people. The dead do not revisit the earth. No, thank God! They rest in peace, after leaving this world of trouble. And besides, I do not believe in holding animosity against any one. I do not, and cannot think that it is right. We have but a short space of time, at best, to dwell on this little planet, and we ought to endeavor, as far as in us lies, to love, and respect, and treat each other kindly. I know that you feel so, when you try and forget the bitterness that is past. Not only that, but my father must have felt so at the last. Did he not wish to see Colonel Carbury, and to ask his forgiveness, when dying? And does not that prove that, when we get a glimpse of Heaven, when we begin to realize the goodness of the Creator, and our own utter unworthiness, when we see at the last how exceeding wrong-headed our course of life has been, we ought to think more upon our own faults, and, forgetting those of others, hold out the friendly hand to them?"

"I freely admit that a great many people do not arrive at this state of feeling until it is too late to put it in practice; but it is for the very good reason—or rather, bad one—that they do not allow themselves to think upon the subject, and continue to be ruled by their own narrow-minded and selfish prejudices. Mankind, it seems to me, are very much what circumstances and surroundings have made them; and, if this was only more generally understood and truthfully realized, there would be much more of that charity which thinketh no evil, and more kindness of feeling extended from one to another; and, in consequence, far less of misery in the world."

"Charles Adler! Do you mean to tell me, your own deeply-injured mother, that you would, without malice or hypocrisy in your heart, take the hand of Lafayette Carbury in friendship?"

"I most certainly, and gladly would, mother, did I think that he was in a state of mind to bury the past, and accept my friendship. I have never wronged him by word or act; and it would be the height of injustice in him to bear malice or hatred against the son for the fancied wrongs done him by the father."

"I do not believe you, Charles. The blood

of an Adler, or a Clarke, could not run in the veins of one who would so degrade and humble himself as to court the notice and friendship of a man who once raised a deadly weapon to take his father's life. Both your poor father and myself belong to proud and haughty families, and many a member of both has been principal or second in an affair of honor in the good old State of Kentucky. You should rather seek to avenge the wrongs that were put upon your father, than thus tamely to forgive and forget them. No, my son! Bear yourself haughtily, now that you may be said to have come to man's estate. Put yourself in the way of Colonel Carbury, and of that worthless son of his. Court their insults, instead of their favor. Then challenge the insulter. I know very well that your father must have taught you to shoot, and insisted upon your practicing for that very purpose. He would not have been his own father's son, had he done otherwise. Indeed I believe you are now considered the best pistol-shot in this part of the country. It was only the impotency that approaching death brings with it, which caused my poor husband to ask for the colonel in his last hours. I do not believe he knew, at the time, what he was saying. He could not have done so."

"You pain me most deeply, mother, by speaking in such a way. I sincerely wish, above all things, that your mind and heart could be so changed that you might see this sad business in the true light. Do think, think deeply of what I have said in regard to the worse than foolishness, the wickedness, of nursing ill-will and animosity; and the content of mind which comes only from the exercise of that true humanity which is born of charity toward the faults of others. If we would but try so to live, that the just judgment which all shall receive when the last trumpet sounds will pass us, unquestioned, through the golden gates, where envy, hatred and malice can never enter!"

"Have you finished, Mr. Charles Adler? If so, permit me to say just this much. I have lived a little longer in this world than you have; and, with all due deference, I must be allowed to say that I do not stand in need of your advice. I would like to see a proper spirit of pride and manliness in my only son. I wish, more than ought else, that you were more high-spirited and independent, and worthy of your ancestors. I had hoped you had, by this time, put away childish things; but I perceive that I shall have to wait a little longer before you have become a man. When you shall have reached my age, you will have formed very different opinions. Mankind are what they are, and not what you would make them. They are selfish and unjust, and that continually. They will seek your society when you are prosperous, and will shun you like a pestilence when you are in trouble and adversity. Take my own case, if you need an illustration. I have no friends—not one upon earth—and now my only child treats my counsels with contempt."

Turning in her angry and impatient walk across the apartment, Mrs. Adler now faced her son, and in a tone of determination, backed by the sternest look he had ever seen her wear, while her eyes flashed with sudden fury, she exclaimed:

"It is a mere waste of words for you and me to talk. Hear me, once for all. If you disgrace your name by an alliance with that detestable family, I shall disinherit you and leave this plantation at my death to some charitable institution; for that insipid Cora shall never cross my threshold, and not one penny of my money shall ever go to support a child of Lafayette Carbury!"

As she paused from her sudden burst of anger, Charles opened his lips to offer a mild and respectful expostulation, but, with a hasty step and a forbidding gesture, the indignant mother swept from the apartment.

CHAPTER III.

THE GAMBLERS.

ABOUT the same time that Charles Adler and his mother were engaged in the conversation which terminated so unpleasantly to the former, two young men mounted upon spirited horses, the animals by their foam spattered sides showing that they had been ridden long and fast, ambled into the open park through the timber in the rear of the stables of Magnolia Plantation. Here they slackened their

pace and entered softly and without having attracted the notice of any one on the premises, their whole actions and the manner of their approach showing plainly that such was their object.

Hastily removing the equipments of their horses, they secured them in stalls and then entered a small apartment to the right of the stable door. This done, they hastily closed and secured it.

The room was finished with planed, unpainted boards, and had various closets for harness and the different appointments of the stable, and the windows had close shutters which prevented any light in the apartment from being seen from the outside.

One of the young men was James Carbury, the brother of Cora; the other was known as Hank Roberts, and had of late been the recognized boon companion of the heir to the Magnolias.

Young Carbury has been already described as singularly attractive in person; indeed, both young men were well formed, and would have been considered as possessed of a more than ordinary share of good looks, had it not been for a general air of recklessness and the unmistakable marks of dissipation, which had begun to tell upon them. James Carbury was slight and elegant in his build, and with the graceful bearing of a gentleman, notwithstanding the habits into which he had fallen, while Roberts was much more fully developed, with broad shoulders and a sinewy frame.

In the room attached to the stables, into which we have just seen them pass, and which was some distance removed from the mansion, these and other young men of the neighborhood, of similar stamp, had been wont for some years back to meet for the purpose of card-playing, carousing and drinking; and many thousands of dollars had here changed hands, sometimes in a single night, during the stormy, which was *par excellence* the idle season on the plantations.

A goodly store of such necessities of a *dolce far niente* life as liquors, cigars, pipes and tobacco were secreted in a private closet, which was unknown to any except the parties most interested, and the one faithful old negro who had the charge of the stables.

When the two young men entered this room they at once proceeded to make themselves comfortable, as well as to prepare for business. Lighting some candles and procuring a bottle and glasses, together with a pack of cards, from the *sanctum sanctorum* of the delectable James, they seated themselves at a table in the middle of the apartment, and after tossing off a succession of stiff drinks, began the great occupation of their lives, each placing a tempting pile of gold near at hand, some of which was neatly rolled up in paper and sealed, showing that it was only recently safely deposited in the bank of the nearest town.

We may, however, with profit to our readers, pass over some four or five hours of the time that followed, and again look in upon the pair, who have meanwhile been not only playing for heavy stakes, but drinking deeply.

James Carbury's long, tawny hair is disheveled, his face flushed and his eyes glassy, as he throws down the cards with an air of desperation, and grasping the brandy bottle, pours out two glasses more than half full of the fiery liquid.

Taking up one and clicking it against the other, he drank, without diluting it, the entire draught at a single gulp; then, pushing the remaining goblet across the table toward his companion, he hastily drew his handkerchief from his pocket and for some moments continued to wipe his forehead and eyes.

Quick as a flash Roberts caught up the glass, poured its contents upon the floor alongside of him, and then as quickly held it to his lips, with the bottom considerably elevated, until Carbury lowered his handkerchief; he then smacked his lips, closed his eyes and contorted his face, as though he had found the brandy more powerful than he had expected, at the same time replacing the empty goblet somewhat violently upon the table.

Although Hank Roberts has every appearance of being considerably intoxicated, it is nothing more than a well-assumed pretense; he has naturally a much stronger head than his more reckless companion, and, besides, he has been very careful to drink only when he could not in any way avoid doing so without attracting notice. Clearly he might be classed as a professional in that respect, while poor Car-

bury was nothing more than a not particularly promising amateur.

Hank is gotten up in the last extreme of the flashy style of dress, which invariably fixes the position of the wearer as a fast man. A gorgeous diamond pin, with heavy chain, and a number of pendent seals, also several of the "loudest" description of rings on his fingers; these told the whole story. But, along with this, his face showed deep cunning, and unscrupulous villainy; and these were intensified by the potations which he had been unable to avoid swallowing. In short, he was a representative man of a class which bids fair never to become extinct.

"Your deal, Hank," exclaimed his companion, as he removed the bandanna from his eyes, "and it is the last deal to-night! I want you to remember that. I have lost every infernal game in the last two hours, and down goes my whole pile on this hand, even if you have got the handling of the paste-boards. I wish I hadn't poured down quite so much of that brandy; but, confound it, how can a fellow help himself? The stuff is fourth-proof, and goes to the spot every time; but a man has to gulp it down every few minutes, or else feel as squirmish as blazes. I don't know what the deuce you are made of. You seem to be able to sit all day and all night at cards, drinking right straight along at every deal, and still you are able, up to the last moment, to distinguish a queen from a king. But I can tell you one thing. I have been going it a little too heavy of late, and I shall be forced to let up, and taper off, or else, hanged if I don't have snakes in my boots before I know where I am, or what I'm about!"

While James Carbury was speaking, it was plain that he was trying his utmost to appear indifferent and unaffected by the liquor he had been drinking; but his trembling hands, and wild, almost insane stare toward his partner, as the latter went on shuffling the cards, told too plainly that he was on the verge of mania.

Nervously the young man clutched the cards as they were dealt to him, glancing quickly at the faces as he ran them through his hands. He then looked up at Roberts, who asked carelessly:

"What are they worth, Jim?"

"Just what I told you, Hank," was the reply. "I am going to draw two cards, and bet my pile. There's a chance for you, old fellow, that you don't often get; but, as I said before, I'm getting desperate."

"Well, I'm in, Jim, every time. I'll 'see' your pile, seein' that is all I can do, and I'll take but one card."

"I'll bet a hat," said Carbury, "that you're drawing to a flush, and will get a bob-tailed hand. Confound the luck! But I'm after you hot and heavy. Sling me those blasted cards!"

Hank deliberately dealt off three cards, as ordered, threw them carelessly to his partner, and then pretended to take but one for himself. At the same time, he adroitly secured three, by a sleight of hand movement discarding, without, as he thought, being discovered at the trick. As he did so, he called out in a triumphant way:

"I've got you, Jim Carbury; I've got you! If you think you're bucking against a bob-tailed flush this time, you are badly fooled."

"What have you got, Hank?" asked his companion. The tone was the coolest and calmest that could possibly be imagined, but there was a cunning and dangerous glitter in the young man's eyes.

"Three aces and two kings," was the reply.

"Show me your hand!"

Hank quietly displayed his cards.

"Well, sir," said Carbury; "the cards call for the money—no question about that—but you can't have it, Hank Roberts!"

As he spoke, he arose to his feet, placed his hand upon the gold and then reeling back and forth in a drunken manner, he continued in a voice that was strangely steady under the circumstances:

"You will never deal another card in a game with me, Hank Roberts; or pocket another dollar of my money. I drew to three queens, and the fourth is under the table, where you threw it. You, Hank, drew to a pair of aces and a pair of kings, and then filled on aces by giving yourself three cards to select from, in place of one—all you were entitled to. Now, look here, Hank Roberts! You have won more than twenty thousand dollars from me, on my own premises, and at this very table. You, more than any one else, have

made me what I am—a drunkard, a gambler, and last—yes, it is true—a forger. Fool, idiot that I have been, I never suspected or mistrusted your villainous character for a moment, and I should have been as blind as ever to your infernal tricks, to-night, had not Dan, the hostler, happened to change the position of that mirror, and hang it up directly behind your chair!"

At first, Hank Roberts turned as pale as death; but, as Carbury continued, he began to assume a bold front, and throwing the cards to the floor, sprung to his feet, his fists clinched, and his face flaming with indignation.

"Are you drunk, Jim Carbury, or are you crazy? Do you mean to charge me with having cheated, at this, or at any other game?"

"I mean to say just this, Hank Roberts," said James, in a clear and defiant voice; "that you are a professional gambler, a cheat, a liar, a scoundrel, and a coward!"

James Carbury's face was no longer flushed, either with brandy or with passion, but was pale as marble; but his form, nevertheless, trembled with excitement the most intense, as he hissed the last words. No sooner, however, had his lips closed, than Roberts dealt him a powerful blow, and he fell forward upon his face on the floor.

CHAPTER IV. DISCOVERY AND DEATH.

THE gambler clutched the gold, and had just concealed it about his clothing, when, as he was in the act of pouring out for himself a glass of the brandy wherewith to steady his nerves, an old negro suddenly opened the door, and exclaimed, as he saw his young master stretched upon the floor:

"Gol a'mighty, Marse Jim! What de debil done make dat jounce on de flo'?"

At the first glance Dan did not realize that his young master was insensible.

"Come in, Dan," invited Roberts, in the most nonchalant manner possible. "Your Marse Jim is as drunk as a fool, I am sorry to say. He fell down just now, and I reckon he must have struck his head pretty hard against the planks."

With deep concern and grief pictured upon his ebon face, the old negro, who was strongly attached to his master, ran for water, and with much fuss and lamentation began bathing the young man's head. Hank Roberts coolly lighted a cigar from Carbury's box, and prepared to leave the room; but, before he could cross the apartment, James revived, and rising to his feet with an effort, sprung to the door, and placing his back against it, glared from his bloodshot eyes the intensest hate and madness, as he cried out:

"Hold, Hank Roberts! I have been told many tales about you in the last few months, but I have heeded them not—well would it have been for me if I had done so. I now believe you to be, as I have been informed, Sneaky Jim, alias Shuffling Cyrus, who murdered a young girl on a Red River steamboat, and threw her overboard, having first blasted her life and lured her from a happy home. I believe you are the same villain for whose apprehension ten thousand dollars reward is offered for having robbed a bank in New Orleans. But, whoever or whatever you may be, you cannot leave this plantation until you have first given me satisfaction. I am no detective, and I want nothing to do with law. I shall probably have enough of that on my hands in the near future, thanks to you also. You have swindled me at cards, and made a felon of me to procure the money wherewith I might pay my gambling debts to you—debts which I never really owed. And now you have struck me!"

"I am no pugilist, and do not propose to fight in any such way. I will leave you here, while I go to the house for my revolver, which, if I had with me now, you would be a dead man. You have your pistol, and you know how to use it. We will have this thing out in a fair and square way, by moonlight, and without witnesses. Dan, don't allow this man to leave the stables! Pass out, and I will lock the door."

"Hank Roberts, I am a dead shot. I shall give you a fair show, which is more than you deserve. But I intend to kill you. No man shall say that he struck a Carbury—no man shall do it, and live to tell of it. I shall kill you for that blow; I swear it, by all the gods!"

The scoundrel, Roberts, would have replied

in the most insulting manner as he sprung forward; but the door slammed in his face, the lock clicked, and he was alone.

With grating teeth, and a murderous, determined look the gambler walked at once to the table, poured out a full goblet of brandy and drank it with desperate eagerness, then, drawing a long-bladed bowie-knife from his belt, he felt the keen edge, and muttered in a soliloquy, his low but deep and hoarse voice expressing the astonishment and apprehension which he felt.

"How, in the name of all the mysteries, did the fellow get that infernal information? The mention of that performance of mine on the Red River brought clearly back every devilish circumstance connected with it. I could hear again Annette's shriek, and the heavy splash as she struck the swift running river. Great God! how cold, how icy cold ran the blood in my veins for a full minute. But this brandy gives me new life. It braces me up for the dangerous work which I feel in my bones is ahead of me. However, Hank, old man, you are better than a dozen dead men yet, and your usual luck will bring you out of this scot free, or I am greatly mistaken. I must get away from this section, but, if I were to fly now, that nigger or Jim, one or other, would blow on me. Then, of course, the blood-hounds will be let loose, and I shall be torn to pieces.

"By heavens! they know too much here. It is dangerous, devilishly dangerous, and so suggestive of a rope that I can actually detect the smell of hemp and feel a choking sensation at my throat now. But it must be done. They must die - both of them!"

Jerking open one of the closets, Hank removed a lot of harness from the hooks, and threw the same on the floor. He then gave a slight kick at one of the boards in the back partition, which at once flew from its place, disclosing an opening through which he crawled into the stable, continuing, as he did so, his soliloquy:

"It was an infernally lucky thing for me that I had the forethought to saw this board out, or I would have been in a tight fix about now. Little did the boys think, and Jim Carbury among them, that when I pretended to be sick and tired of cards, and made out that I was off fishing in the bayou, I was in the harness-room listening to ascertain if they had learned or suspected anything of my character and doings in the past, as well as to learn when and how they proposed to raise funds to keep up the game."

Gliding through the darkness, Roberts now groped his way to the outer door of the stable; but, before he reached it, suddenly it opened, and Dan, the negro hostler, ran against him.

"Gol' a'mighty! Who dar?"

These were the last words that the poor slave ever uttered, for, as they fell from his lips, in his utter surprise and fright, his throat was clutched in a death-like grip. Hank's dark work had already begun.

For some moments the dark and gloomy building was filled with sounds that were unheard by other human ears than those of the parties in this deadly conflict. Sounds of the struggling together of strong and desperate men, mingled with a horrid gurgling and choking, and quickly followed by the grating of steel, as again and again it was plunged in mad thrusts through flesh and bone. Then came a heavy fall upon the floor, and the horrible gasping of a human being in the death-agony, as the knife was withdrawn, and the blood spurted against the rough boarding and over the plank floor.

The first part of the dark and cowardly work which Hank Roberts had laid out for himself, was completed to his satisfaction. With his gore-stained hands outstretched and holding the dripping bowie-knife, the assassin stumbled toward the door in the darkness, and opened it. He then fled into the dense shade of the magnolias, his face, murderer though he was, blanched with horror - fled from the crime-tainted air, and the blood that was crying to Heaven for vengeance. Away from the dread death-struggles of his innocent victim - Dan, the old and faithful hostler of Magnolia Plantation, and once the servant of the Adlers.

CHAPTER V.

FROM THE JAWS OF DEATH.

For a few minutes after his mother's departure in anger, and with that gesture which forbade further reasoning, Charles Adler paced

the apartment with a troubled expression upon his handsome, boyish face. Then, crunching his hat down forcibly upon his head, he rushed from the house, wandered aimlessly for a short time through the garden, and eventually found himself beneath the large magnolias, in the vicinity of the bayou.

Standing in the cool shades, the young man threw off his hat and allowed the refreshing breeze, which now floated softly from the Gulf, to fan his heated brow.

His mother's concluding words, and her manner toward him, had cut him to the quick. They had struck his heart with a deathlike feeling, and filled his brain with the most bitter despondency.

What ought he to do? The independent spirit, which his mother had just now said that she regretted he did not possess, was fully aroused within him. He made up his mind that he must leave the paternal roof. He would go, without delay, and begin the work of carving out a name and fortune of his own. But the more he pondered over it and laid his plans, the greater grew the difficulties in the way of it, and the more it seemed impossible for him to accomplish any such undertaking. Had his education been of a more practical nature; had he even been taught book-keeping, or some knowledge of mercantile affairs, the future would not have worn quite such a gloomy appearance. As it was, the outlook was not promising.

While thus perplexed in mind, he was suddenly awakened from the depths of his abstraction and meditation by a shrill scream for help, from female lips - from lips that no sound could ever pass without causing his blood to quicken its circulation.

For one instant Charles Adler stood in his tracks, as if frozen to the spot, and dazed with wonder, and agonizing concern; then, smashing his hat into a shapeless mass, and throwing it from him in his excitement, he sprung in eager bounds toward the bayou, from whence the sounds seemed to proceed.

Increasing his pace, as shriek after shriek of horror and dread rent the air and tortured his heart, in a very little time he gained the clear space between the magnolia grove and the banks of the bayou; where he was chilled to the marrow, as he beheld the terrible sight before and below him.

The fragile boat of Cora Carbury was floating, bottom upward, and the beautiful girl, the idol of his heart, was clinging to a projecting limb, which was a portion of a partially submerged snag, striving, with a strength that was born of intense horror and deadly fear, to draw herself upward. Her feet were beneath the surface of the water, her garments were saturated, and her golden hair hung over her shoulders, glittering and glinting in the sunlight; while beneath and near her was the hideous, slimy head of an enormous alligator, the monster slowly approaching, and apparently about to inclose her fairy-like limbs within his terrible jaws.

With a ringing cry of encouragement, although his brain was throbbing at the same time with the horror of the situation, Charles Adler tore off his coat and boots, jerked his huge bowie-knife from his belt, and sprung afar out from the high bluff into the deep waters of the bayou.

As he arose to the surface, he slipped his knife quickly between his teeth, and lunged forward; the faint and despairing cries of Cora spurring him on to superhuman efforts to lessen the distance between himself and his idol.

As Charles struck the water with a sounding splash, the attention of the amphibious monster was attracted from its prey; and, as he covered half the distance, the alligator swam slowly toward him, leaving Cora, who, unable longer to retain her hold on the limb, fell with a cry of despair and horror into the dark water, looking for nothing but to be crushed to death the next instant.

No sooner did the exhausted and fear-paralyzed girl strike the surface of the bayou, than again the slimy monster turned toward the snag; but, before Cora arose to the surface, Charles swam directly up to the head of the gigantic saurian; his right hand held clear of the water, and grasping firmly his long-bladed bowie.

Quickly the huge jaws parted and yawned dismally, and as quickly was the hand of Charles Adler thrust between the rows of glittering teeth, the bowie held point upward

and piercing the roof of the monster's mouth as it closed its ponderous jaws; the handle of the weapon being dexterously left on the inner side of the row of teeth of the under jaw.

The moment that Charles had accomplished this daring act he dived deliberately under the water, and swam in a half-circle around the pain-maddened monster, and toward the snag where, to his great joy, he saw that Cora had arisen to the surface, and was again clinging desperately to the log, only her death-pale face appearing above the murky waters.

In a few seconds he had reached her side, climbed upon the snag, and drawing her upon the log, clasped his right arm about her waist, supporting himself by holding on to the projecting limb with his left hand.

Not a word was spoken by either, for both sat silent, and with pallid faces; he, panting with his late exertion, and she, with excitement and dread, her eyes speaking the thankfulness that was new-born in her heart, and the feeling of relief more intense than words could express. Down beneath them, they gazed upon the furious alligator, as it lashed the water into foam from the huge jaws that were held open by the torturing bowie-knife.

For a time the amphibious monster thrashed the surface of the bayou for some distance around him with rage and pain. He then plunged down into the dark depths; soon, however, returning half-drowned. Then it slowly swam away from the scene of its defeat, and crawled into the tall reeds which grew near the opposite bank.

Charles Adler bent his head, and turned his pale, anxious face, looking upon the uplifted features of the shuddering maiden, whose hair, now dripping with water from the bayou, and the light of the now declining sun blazing upon it, fell over his arm in waves of glittering golden threads; her grateful eyes met his, and in their depths he read, as in a book, the assurance of an undying love.

Bending still further, he pressed his lips to hers, while both trembled with the intensity of their passion, now for the first time expressed more openly than by a glance of the eye.

"I owe you my life, Charley," said the young girl. "I can never repay you. I cannot even speak my gratitude as I would. You have saved me from a most horrible death."

These words were spoken low, and in such a tone as was never to be forgotten by the one who so eagerly caught them; and, as the last were uttered, she shuddered, and clung more closely to her preserver.

"I thank God for it, Cora," he said. "He has blessed me, as I believe man never was blessed before; for I do not think there ever was an angel like you upon this earth. But happy, ay, heavenly as this moment is to me, we must consider your drenched condition. Hold on firmly to the snag, darling, while I try and recover your boat."

"Oh, do not leave me, Charles! There may be more of those hideous monsters in the bayou. I know I shall never dare to row again."

The young girl's words of entreaty were, however, allowed to pass unheeded, for Charles plunged into the water once more, swam to and righted the floating skiff, and then returned. Seating himself upon the log, he succeeded in emptying the greater part of the water from the little boat; and then, the maiden stepping into it, Charles swam toward the shore, pushing it ahead of him, as the oars had been lost.

"I shall try to enter the house, and change my garments without being seen," was Cora's remark, as her lover assisted her up the bank; "for, if father or mother should see me in this plight, I should be forced to explain everything, and then they would probably prohibit me from coming to the bayou again. Oh, dear! I shall never, never forget that horrible monster. I know it will visit me in my dreams."

"I hope I shall accompany it in that case," said Charles, with a laugh, "should it chance to disturb your slumbers; as then, it will be for me to stand between you and all harm, real or fancied. I hope you will not be observed when you reach the house. Don't neglect to change your wet garments at once, or you will certainly be ill. I would like, more than anything else in the world, to meet you in the magnolia grove this evening, if you have recovered sufficiently from your fright, my darling; for I have that to say to you which must be spoken."

"I will be there an hour after sunset, Char-

ley. Do not keep me waiting, please; for I am always afraid of meeting that Hank Roberts there. Do you know him, Charley? I do not suppose you ever associate with such questionable characters—in deed I know very well that you do not—but, I am ashamed to say, my brother James is almost constantly with him. He plays cards, I am aware, and drinks to excess, and induces my brother to do the same. Some say that he is a villain at heart, and that, if the truth were told about him, his past record is very bad. I have never spoken of it before, although his forcing himself upon my attention, in the way he has taken to doing of late, has greatly troubled me. I have been afraid, many a time to venture beyond the garden after dusk; unless when I know you are near at hand. But, please, do not allow my words to trouble you. I shall always, for the future, go prepared to defend myself, and I shall resent any and every undue familiarity from him."

"You not only surprise, but you distress me very much, Cora. I shall certainly prepare myself to defend you; and if I witness any attempt on his part to approach you, I will take care that he regrets the day he was born."

"I ought never to have told you of this, Charley," said the girl; "and there was no reason in the world why I should do such a thing. Really, now, you mustn't look so serious about what amounts to so very little. I shall be compelled to laugh, if I see you attach so much importance to such a trivial matter. Forget my words just as soon as you can, for I don't much think that Mr. Hank Roberts will dare obtrude his disagreeable attentions upon me again, as I threatened to inform my father the last time he did so. Good-by now, I must go. To-night, then, beneath the magnolias." And, tossing a kiss, in a careless, laughing way, Cora Carbury ran hastily toward the garden of Magnolia Plantation, disappearing among the flowers, and she the loveliest flower of them all.

Returning to the spot in the timber, at which he had been when he was first alarmed by the screams of her whom he loved, Charles Adler recovered the bat which he had flung from him in his excitement, and, forgetting the last injunction of Cora in regard to Hank Roberts, he sat down for a time and brooded, boy-like, over this new trouble which seemed to threaten them. Soon, however, it vanished before the bright recollection of the happy moments they had just passed together, and the thoughts of those which were to come, and he arose and walked quickly toward his home; his face radiant with joy and hope, his step buoyant, and his whole being filled with rapture.

He succeeded in reaching his room without being noticed, and having changed his clothing, descended to the supper-room, where he was forced to take his evening meal by himself; his mother not making her appearance.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TRAIL OF THE SERPENT.

WHEN the dastardly assassin of the poor old negro fled in horror from the scene of his cowardly crime, a bright moon was softly shining down upon the weird loveliness of the beautiful semi-tropical surroundings of Magnolia Plantation; and turning the calm waters of the Mexican Gulf, as they spread far out to the eastward, into one vast scintillating mirror of silver. But around the outbuildings were many tall trees, and much dense shrubbery, which caused it to be quite dark in their immediate vicinity; and as, by this time, the slaves were, as usual, all congregated about their cabins, no one saw the murderer as he stole hurriedly away from the stables, as if all the avenging demons in Hades had been suddenly let loose upon him, and were in close pursuit.

Having made up his mind, the very moment that he found his true character was known to the man whom he had duped and defrauded, to kill him without giving him the opportunity of defending himself, Hank Roberts now, stealthily, after reaching the thick shade of the magnolias, made his way by a circuitous route through the deep shadows to the margin of the grove which was located to the north of the mansion, and adjoining the gardens; the latter extending a long distance in front of the house.

Here, there were no scarcity or hiding-places, and here, by some of these winding paths, the wretch well knew that James Carbury would

be obliged to pass, on his way from his dwelling to the stables.

The grove of magnificent magnolias stretched from close to the beach westward for a considerable distance, and then curved around in the rear of the mansion toward its southern side, thus forming a crescent, the open side of which was toward the Gulf.

Between the flower-beds and the magnolia trees was a clear, open space some thirty feet in width; this strip of lawn was illuminated by the bright moon, and stood out from the surrounding gloom in almost the clearness of the daytime. Here it was that the cowardly murderer, his hands still stained with gore fresh from his recent crime, planned to wait for another victim, and prepared for the commission, if it should be possible, of one more dastardly deed before he should leave Magnolia Plantation, where his secret would then be buried. Hidden in the densest of the shrubbery commanding a view of the lighted open space which has been described, the magnolias on his right hand and the garden paths leading to the same from the mansion on his left, he waited and watched.

But a little time had Hank Roberts been in this position—probably not longer than five minutes—when, walking slowly from the dark shades of the magnolias, he saw, not James Carbury, but, to his surprise and anger, a man and a woman whom at a glance he recognized, the latter leaning upon the arm of her companion.

Seeing on the instant that it was Charles Adler who accompanied Cora Carbury on this moonlight promenade, the villain grated his teeth in redoubled rage and jealousy. Rage that his plan to murder the man whom he had cheated seemed about to be frustrated; and jealousy to see the girl whom he had sworn should some time in the near future be in his power, walking with one whom he hated and despised, and who now, to all appearance, held the position of an accepted lover.

To be foiled in this way, and by a soft-headed milk-sop, as he and his delectable dupe, the sons of the planters in the neighborhood, had been in the habit of calling Charles Adler; at such a time, too, and in such an aggravating manner, was almost enough to drive the black-hearted villain insane with rage and fury, and under the influence of the moment's passion he was on the point of jeopardizing his life by risking a long shot at Charles.

His Satanic Majesty is said to favor his own, at least some words to that effect form the substance of an old adage, which, if not universally true, was certainly so in the present instance.

Charles Adler, as if fearful of compromising his fair companion, hurriedly pressed her to his breast and imprinted a kiss upon her forehead, as her love-lit features, angelically beautiful, were upturned to his; then he quietly and gently thrust her from him, pushing her away, and she tripped softly along a flower bordered path toward her home, while the young man stood by the edge of the shadows which were cast by the magnolias, gazing after her fast-fading form in the moonlight.

Happiness supreme might be supposed to be the envied possession of Charles Adler at this moment. He had just pressed to his breast the one whom he loved more than all else that the world contained; he had touched his lips to her pure white forehead, and the manner of both showed that they had come to a mutual and most agreeable understanding as to their future. It was evident that the words—whatever they were—which, upon parting with her that afternoon after having saved her from the jaws of the alligator, he had said must be spoken that night, had passed his lips, and had been favorably received.

Doubtless it was the happiest moment of the young man's life, and no human being in such a state of ecstatic bliss as he was—no mortal in a moment of such unalloyed happiness, almost heavenly, could have thought it possible, or even dreamed, that close following upon that blissful vision of Eden an event would happen that would hurl him into the depths of the blackest despair, and horror, and disgrace, the deepest and most inconsolable grief, the most insane and brain-torturing desperation.

Life is made up of just such extremes, and though they but seldom follow so close upon each other, yet now and then it does occur, in the awful mockery of fate, as if to try the extent of human endurance, and to show, at the same time, how narrow is the passage and how slight the dividing walls of partition between

the utmost realizations of happiness and misery.

But so it was to be. For as Charles Adler stood in the cool shadows on that beautiful moonlight evening, inhaling the sweet perfumes that were borne upon the passing zephyr, while he gazed after the white drapery that inclosed the angel-like form of the one he idolized, and now vanishing in the weird and gorgeous light of the silver moon; the gates of an earthly Tartarus were slowly opening, and a fiend in human shape, unseen and unsuspected, was crouching ready to hurl him into the worst and most agonizing of tortures.

Having bathed his hands and soul in the innocent blood of a faithful old slave, Hank Roberts, after his deadly encounter in the stable, was in the most terrible state of mind that can perhaps be imagined—a state of mind that boded no good to any human being he might meet. Disappointed as he was, and doomed apparently to the fate of having to crawl away from the scene of his crime, with the certainty of being pursued, and the almost certainty of being discovered, the gambler was now murder-mad.

After the departure of Cora Carbury, the lurking desperado gazed with blood-shot and fiendish eyes, filled with their deadly purpose, toward Charles Adler, who stood with his arms folded; a perfect model, in the glory of his young manhood, of strength and beauty, wrapped evidently in the deepest thought and totally unconscious of his surroundings, his whole heart and mind and soul filled with the rose-colored dreams of requited and first love.

Impatiently the assassin crouched among the thick branches of a flowering acacia, awaiting the departure of young Adler, and fully resolved that he would follow and shoot him; or, if not, to lure him by some means into the stable, and afterward denounce him as the murderer of old Dan. These plans, however, he had quickly to abandon; for the low, muttered, drink-maddened curses of James Carbury were now heard, as, pistol in hand, the young man came running hastily from the mansion by a different route from that which had been taken by his sister Cora. At times he would leap over the flower-beds, as the path made an abrupt turn from his direct course, which at last brought him to the very spot where Charles Adler stood, unwilling to steal away in the darkness, when he saw the man upon whose grounds he was, coming fast toward him.

CHAPTER VII.

"BLOOD WILL COME OF THIS."

ON like a madman dashed James Carbury, uttering a shout of almost fiendish satisfaction as he caught sight of Adler, whom he supposed in the uncertain light and the confused condition of his faculties, to be the gambler of whom he was in search; and who must, in some way, have escaped from the stables. He would not spare him—who could expect it of him? Had not the wretch wronged him in the foulest manner, and blighted his young, and once promising life?

Like a wild beast James sprung across the moonlit space in frantic bounds, yelling at the top of his voice.

"Fair play at ten paces, Hank Roberts! But it is recorded that I shall kill you—remember that! Justice will direct my bullet through your craven heart!"

"Hold, James Carbury! One moment, if you please," said Charles Adler quietly, as he stepped quickly into the moonlight to meet the brandy-crazed man who sprung toward him. "You have made a mistake, Carbury. I am not Hank Roberts, the man whom you seem to be looking for. Put up your pistol, I beg of you, and when you are calmer, and in full possession of your sober senses, have recourse to the law, if he whom you mention has wronged you to the extent that your words and manner intimate."

"I have mistaken my man, Charles Adler, but you come in on this deal also. You have, I presume, been walking with my sister, or else you are now waiting to meet her, and hence your presence on these grounds where you know you have no right to be. You are well aware that Miss Carbury's parents have forbidden her to speak to such as you. Take that! if you are not a coward, as your sneaking, clandestine manner indicates. But you shall fight me, nevertheless!"

As James Carbury spoke, he struck Charles a heavy blow in the face.

For an instant, young Adler stood, pale as death; trembling in the attempt to battle with and control his passion, while the hot blood rushed like melted lava through his veins.

"Draw and defend yourself!"

Thus yelled Carbury, as in a staggering manner he began pacing off the ground, and then took his position at ten of his irregular paces from his unwilling opponent. Charles Adler was now calm.

"I do not wish, nor do I intend to fight you, James," he said, but in a voice that, steady though it was, sounded strangely hoarse and unnatural. "You are intoxicated to-night. I will reason with you when you are in a fit state of mind to understand me. You have grossly insulted me, but I can make some allowances, and will pass that over. You are not responsible for your base and cowardly act; and, as for the young lady whose name you have dragged into this unseemly dispute, I respect her too much to think of forfeiting her regard by raising a weapon against her brother."

These words seemed only to incense James Carbury the more. Doubly maddened now, he swung his revolver in the air, and cried out in a voice of fury:

"Enough of such bosh, Charles Adler! You and I are not babies, I suppose. Draw, or I will shoot you in your tracks, as I would a dog whom I caught trespassing!"

"I understand you, James Carbury. You are bent on killing me. Be it so, then. I only draw my weapon to save you from the doom of a deliberate murderer. I shall not harm you. I shall shoot in the air—remember that! Never at you, James Carbury! I shall shoot in the air."

A stifled cry from the direction of the mansion came upon the soft evening breeze, but amid the war of human passions it floated past them unheard. A flutter of white garments, in another instant, might have been seen approaching through the shrubbery. Crazed and intoxicated, James Carbury raised his pistol, and then yelled at his antagonist:

"Shoot at the word, Adler!"

"I shall shoot into the magnolias over your head," was the firm reply; "and God forgive you, if you take my life!"

As he said these words, Charles Adler pointed his weapon skyward, at the same time closing his eyes, and breathing an earnest prayer, in which the words "Mother" and "Cora" were alone audible.

"One—two—three!"

As the last word died on James Carbury's lips, a shriek of horror, the most intense, close followed by a loud report of pistols, simultaneously discharged, and James Carbury and his sister Cora, who at that moment had come rushing through the shrubbery, both fell to the earth.

James Carbury had heard the shriek of his sister at the very instant that the word "Three"—the very last he was to utter this side of eternity—sounded on the air; and his finger touched the trigger, as lightning-like his thoughts were now centered upon Cora, whose voice he recognized in that agonizing scream.

Through the heart of Charles Adler the wild pleading cry cut like a stab of cold steel. At the same moment, he felt a stinging sensation in his shoulder, and opening his eyes quickly, he beheld a sight that caused the blood to congeal in his veins, and the very marrow in his bones to seem turned into ice.

There, in front of him, and but ten paces away, stretched at full length upon the green sward, was James Carbury, the antagonist, at whom he had not shot; and, at but a few paces to the west, and above them, lay Cora, the angel of his waking dreams. The faces of both sister and brother were upturned to the moon, pale as if chiseled from blocks of Parian marble; while, down the side of the white forehead of his darling, and mingling with her long golden hair, ran a tiny stream of blood.

"Great Father in Heaven! What means this fearful mystery?"

As he spoke, Charles Adler staggered forward, his strong frame trembling like an aspen, and knelt beside the form of Cora, his eyes glassy with unspeakable horror and sickening grief and despair.

He felt her delicate wrist, but could detect no pulsation. He placed his hand upon her head, and touched the wound, which, to his great relief, he found had been caused by a

bullet which had glanced, and therefore it could not, he judged, be dangerous.

Charles then returned to the side of the prostrate form of James Carbury, and, tearing open his vest and shirt, found that a bullet had pierced the young man's heart.

"I am lost! Lost! Lost!" he cried in the bitterness of his heart. "Father in heaven, pity me! I am lost, indeed. The gibbet, the doom of a murderer awaits me, although I am innocent of any crime. Who can have done this dastardly deed? It is not possible that I could have inadvertently lowered my weapon at the last moment. Is there no way of explaining this fearful mystery? God help me! I shall go mad, insane, and my gibbering lips shall mutter nothing but blood!"

While the unhappy young man thus raved in agony of mind, sounds of confusion were issuing from the mansion, and soon there came to his ears, along the shell strewn path, the patter of feet. With a convulsive shudder, Charles Adler pressed a hurried kiss upon the brow, and then upon the lips of his senseless darling, and then darted off, as if the fiends were on his trail, through the magnolias, and in the direction of his home—the home that he had left scarce more than one hour before with high hopes and happiest anticipations.

Wildly, from time to time, as he ran, he clinched his hands and raised them toward the bright clear heavens, as he cried out in a voice that was choked with despair and desperation:

"She said it! My mother said it! Blood will come of this. I should think—so she said—that your father would rise from his quiet grave, when you walk past it with a Carbury by your side! It has come! It is that, and nothing less. The curse of my injured father has scorched my brain. My lips are parched, and blood—nothing but blood from henceforth can quench my thirst. Blood, blood on my trail; my every footprint is indelibly marked. Blood is in the sky, and in the very air that I breathe. But no, I can not breathe it!"

"Oh, horror of horrors! What have I done, Almighty God, that this terrible wrong, this most damning wrong should be hurled down upon my innocent head? The proofs are too plain—too strong against me. Even she, Cora, my own heart's idol, will see, and admit it, and raise her voice against me. She will detest me in her inmost soul, and willingly will speak the words that will bring me to the scaffold. Oh, God! this is more, far more than I can bear. There is not a single glimmer of light in the short and gloomy path that lies before me. Will I, will time ever—even when I shall have lain long in a felon's grave—clear up this great, this horrible mystery?"

"Why, oh, why did my jealous feeling cause me to arm myself, this night of all others, against that vile miscreant? Stay! Thank Heaven, there is one gleam of light before me! A clew seems born at the very thought that brings his detested image before my face!"

CHAPTER VIII.

MY SON! MY SON!

The simultaneous discharge of three revolvers had made a far-sounding report, and it rung through the open windows of the Magnolia Mansion, causing much surprise to its inmates at that hour of the evening. The male slaves of the household, who had not retired for the night, rushed out upon the front veranda, followed in short order by the female servants, and, all filled with wonder, they stood in a confused mass gazing out over the garden to the north-east, in the direction of the thickly-grouped magnolias. But the night was now silent as the tomb itself. Even the broad Gulf had the appearance of a sea of silver, as the full moon shone out steadily from a cloudless sky upon its smooth and motionless waters.

"Bress de Lo'd, chilluns!" broke at length from the lips of the aged cook, "I's feared sumfin' drefful's done happened. Whar de curnil? Whar my ole marster? Young Marse James hain't been see'd hyerabouts sence mo'nin'. I doesn't like dis tur'ble kine ob stillness. 'Pears like death ter dis ole chile, an' I's feared dat we'uns done got weepin' an' mou'nin' afore us. I feels hit inter my bones. Gumbo, yer good fer nuffin', lazy young nigger, go an' call yer marse curnil!"

The slaves huddled together and stood whispering, while they gazed with wide-open, bulging eyes out into the darkness which hung over the grove like a heavy pall, and which, to their superstitious imaginations, was peopled with

ghastly forms and fearful demons, conjured up by the boding words of old Aunt Huldy.

A moment more and the negroes had departed in silence, Gumbo, meanwhile, having insisted upon having a chambermaid to attend him through the dark passages of the rambling old mansion. Presently Colonel Carbury rushed out from the door at the head of the landing, and demanded:

"What does all this mean, Aunt Huldy? Why did you have me disturbed? What has occurred to call for all this noise and confusion at this hour of the night?"

"Gol a'mighty, marse curnil! didn't yer hear dat shootin'?"

"Shooting? No. I have heard nothing unusual. I have been asleep, however. Where was it? Did the reports sound as if fired in the grounds here, near at hand? Where is your young master?"

"Hit done sounded, 'pears to dis chile, right clos't. Marse James, did yer say, marse curnil? I hasn't set dese ole eyes on him sence treckus."

"Run out through the garden, will you? Call some of the boys, and then send Phillis up to Miss Cora's room and see if she is asleep. Hal Joe, you are there, I see. Go and find out if your Marse James has retired."

Slowly and reluctantly two of the affrighted negroes proceeded through the garden, both of them trembling with fear and imagining some terrible shape about to emerge from each flowering shrub. The two slaves who had been dispatched to the chambers soon returned with scared faces, and reported that neither "Marse James" nor Miss Cora were in their rooms, and that their beds had not been disturbed.

With a very emphatic ejaculation, and one which expressed his surprise and concern, Colonel Carbury sprung from the veranda to the graveled walk, but at the same instant a piercing cry of terror burst on the night air, and the two slaves who had been sent to explore the garden came bounding over the flower-beds from the direction of the magnolia grove, as if a legion of demons was in pursuit.

"Hold!" yelled the colonel. "Stop this crazy nonsense. Do you hear? What have you seen, you cowardly vagabonds?"

"Marse James!" exclaimed one, with trembling lips, as he glanced in horror over his shoulder, and then fell flat on his face and lay groveling at his master's feet.

"Missy Cora," hoarsely whispered the other, while his eyes rolled about in terror and his strong frame quivered as if in an ague-fit.

Colonel Carbury waited to hear no more. He sprung crashing through shrubs and flowers, directly toward the grove, darting down a direct path as soon as one was reached, with such preternatural speed that when he saw upon the ground before him an outstretched human form with the pallid seal of death upon its face, he could not stop himself, but gathering his strength as at a single glance the features of the son whom he had indulged and idolized were photographed upon his brain, he leaped into the air high over the blood-stained body, and one wild, agonizing, despairing cry of utter horror burst from his lips as he fell with a heavy thud, as though suddenly deprived of life, upon the green turf by the side of his murdered boy.

When the bevy of cowering, terror-stricken slaves heard the yell of their old master, and saw him leap into the air and then fall senseless, their superstitious terrors took complete possession of them. Rushing toward the house, they scrambled, screaming at the top of their lungs, into the ballway, the two men in the garden-path crawling upon their hands and knees, with wild and disconnected prayers upon their lips, up to the veranda and into the dwelling.

Not so, however, with Aunt Huldy, the venerable cook of the Carbury family. Falling to her rheumatic knees, and praying for a moment or two most fervently, she arose and ran to the room of her mistress, whom she found already up and hurriedly dressing.

"Don't yer go ter botter yerself 'bout de fuss what dem good fer-nuffin' niggers done make, missus," said old Huldy, in an assumed tone of unconcern. Then, without waiting to explain or to answer the questions of Mrs. Carbury, the cook quickly descended the stairs, ran out upon the veranda and into the garden, and from thence, walking slowly, she proceeded toward the magnolias, muttering to herself as she went:

"Reckon dis ole chile am 'bout done wid dis worl', an de ole debil hain't got no call ter claim her. 'Pears ter me sumfin drefful hes done bu's loose, an' nobuddy 'cept ole Aunt Huldy got ary sense left. What dat? Gol a'mighty! dar am ole Marse Curnil in a dead faint, sho'!"

One step further old Huldy made, after discovering her old master thus lying upon the sward; then, as she gazed with staring and horror-stricken eyes upon the corpse of her young master, and saw near him the white-clad form and death-pale face of Miss Cora, her forehead stained with blood, the old negress sunk upon her knees, and trembled in every limb, while the hot tears coursed down her furrowed cheeks. Then she crawled toward the silent form of those whom she had nursed in infancy, and loved far better than those of her own flesh and blood.

Coming first to the corpse of James, she caressed it with her trembling, wrinkled hands, at times wiping the tears from her age-dimmed eyes with her faded calico skirt, as she mumbled prayers, and kissed again and again the cold lips. Creeping then over the sward, and with an awful dread tearing at her heart, she came to the prostrate form of Cora.

"Marse James am done gone, dat am sartin sho'; an' he war so wile I is mighty feared he won't git in at de Golden Gate. But, Missy Cora! My po' little lubly doll-baby, my chile, my angell! Oh, Lo'd! why has yer tuck her? She war needed in dis worl' jes' es much es de sunlight. What debil in de shape ob human hes gone an' done dis drefful work? Did my young Marse James shoot he own sister, an' den kill bissell? De Lo'd bress us an' save us! What am we po' worms ob de dus' comin' ter? What am my ole missus ter do now? Dis yere am boun' ter kill her, sho'. De good Lo'd makes de win' blow wa'm on de thin-skin'd lambs, but dis am too drefful fer de po' weak missus."

With these words the old slave clasped the small white hand of Cora, and raised it to her lips, then her eyes suddenly lighted up with joy and she laid the little hand softly on the grass, and lowered her aged head upon the young girl's breast.

"Bress de good Sabior, my chile am alive! De angel am spar'd ter cheer de las' days ob ole Aunt Huldy!" And the old woman rocked her body backward and forward, grasping the delicate hands convulsively and pressing them to her lips, then caressing the long golden hair, and wiping the blood from the wounded girl's forehead, with a loving and gentle touch.

Suddenly Aunt Huldy remembered the colonel, and springing to her feet, she ran to his side, and began rubbing his hands, while she endeavored to raise him to a sitting posture.

Slowly, and as from a lethargic sleep, Colonel Carbury's senses returned; and he opened his eyes, glancing inquiringly into the face of his aged servant, and then looking around him in wonder. But, before Aunt Huldy could control herself sufficiently to explain the terrible facts, the true condition of affairs darted through his mind with electric swiftness, and he sprung to his feet, where he reeled and staggered like a drunken man.

With a stare of agonizing horror bent for a moment upon the dead form of his son, he turned suddenly to a white object upon his right; and, with a heart-rending cry of the most intense and excruciating agony, he tottered toward his daughter, his hands upraised and pressing his forehead, his eyes fixed and glassy, and his lips quivering with a horror that was indescribable.

"Thank de good Lo'd, Marse Curnil, dat Miss Cora am spar'd ter yer. She ain't dead. De po' chile am stunded." And the old slave knelt by her master's side, as he too fell on his knees near his beautiful and much-loved daughter, and sobbing convulsively.

The flood-gates of grief had opened, and the strong man's brain was soon partially relieved from the weighty avalanche of anguish which had so suddenly come down upon it, by a copious flow of tears.

For a time, both master and servant remained kneeling by the side of that silent form, clasping each other's hands; both equal for once in their terrible grief—united by a common bond of suffering.

Then the old planter sprung to his feet in fury.

"Run, aunty; run to the house!" he exclaimed. "Bid Ben and Mose ride for their

lives. Tell them to summon Dr. Maule at once, and then tell the sheriff to collect a posse and come to Magnolia Plantation immediately. The villain, or villains, who have done this dastardly deed, shall suffer a thousand deaths!"

Aunt Huldy hastened to obey orders, and Colonel Carbury lifted his still unconscious daughter from the ground, and carried her, as a mother would her babe, into the mansion and to her room.

All had been silent within the dwelling, since the stampede of the slaves; and Mrs. Carbury, her apprehensions quieted by the words and manner of Aunt Huldy, had taken an anodyne and again retired, supposing that her alarm had originated from imagination, and thus she was spared the sight of her senseless daughter, as poor Cora was tenderly borne to her room, and laid upon her bed by her almost distracted father.

The house servants, when told by Aunt Huldy of the terrible crime that had been committed, and realized that their young master was indeed dead—murdered by some person unknown—and that their beautiful and beloved young mistress was seriously wounded, began at once to fill the air with their lamentations. But they all strove, nevertheless, to do everything that lay in their power to assist in the recovery of Cora, as well as to secure, if possible, the base assassin, or assassins; for, upon learning the sad facts, they knew that human beings, and no supernatural agency, had to do with the dread tragedy of the night.

The two men, who had received orders through Aunt Huldy from the colonel, galloped at break-neck speed to summon the doctor and the sheriff—the former of whom was the first to arrive.

The wound received by Cora proved to be not a serious one, being but a glance shot; but the bullet had struck the skull with sufficient force to give the brain a somewhat severe shock.

Restoratives were administered, and the maiden opened her eyes; but in their depths was mirrored an insane horror that was painful to witness, and she raved, and tossed her arms wildly, while her blood burned with fever.

These symptoms caused Dr. Maule to decide that her case might be more serious than he had at first imagined; in fact dangerous, for he apprehended congestion of the brain, or at the least, brain fever. He therefore resolved that he would remain at the plantation through the night.

"Bress de Lo'd!" exclaimed Aunt Huldy, as she opened a closet to hang up the garments of her young mistress, "jes' feel ob dem clo's, Marse Doctor. Missy Cora done wored dem dis arternoon. Dey is wet, plum froo an' froo. What kine ob doin's hab bin goin' on dis dreful day an' night?"

The doctor approached the closet, and examined the saturated garments which Cora had removed on her return from the bayou, after her adventure with the alligator.

"Has the young lady been out boating to-day?" asked Dr. Maule.

"I 'clar' ter gracious, I doesn't know whar de po' chile done bin. I hes hed ter cook a heap ter-day, an' besn't see'd her purty face roun' de kitchen onc't. An' dat am mighty strange too, fer little missy mos' allers comes ter see her ole aunty some time ob de day."

"She may have taken cold from such a wetting as that must have been; but not sufficient, I should say, to cause such a fever. Neither would the bullet occasion it so suddenly. She must have received a terrible mental shock in some way, and I hope we may be able to learn something in regard to what has occurred, by what she may say while delirious. Where is Colonel Carbury?"

"He am jes' a weepin' an' a mo'nin' ober po' Marse James, I reckons. Oh, Lo'dy! Dis ole chile mus' die 'fore long!" And bursting into tears, the faithful old negress left the room, holding closely and almost lovingly to her breast the wet garments of her young mistress.

At length the suffering maiden lay motionless, Dr. Maule having administered a powerful opiate; but her eyes still remained wide open, and staring fixedly at the ceiling, as if some fearful scene was pictured there. Her face, now lovelier, if possible, than before, was white as the driven snow. Her golden hair lay in long wavy masses, wet with the dews of night, and shining like glittering gold, giving her the look of a slumbering angel, whose gaze upon this world's sin and sorrow had left upon

her mind, even when she slept, an impress of horror.

And without, far down by the dark magnolias, the father knelt alone by his murdered boy. He bent over the cold, stiff corpse, in an anguish of mind that no pen can portray. His features, before so calm and proud, were now drawn with bitter agony of soul and self-condemnation, for was he not himself in a great measure responsible for the sad, sad ending of that young life?

Had he not, by his example, led his only son upon the dread trail of dissipation and excess, and did he not know in his own mind that rum—the fearful curse of mankind—must have been the main cause of the fearful tragedy?

But Lafayette Carbury, with all his faults, had fondly loved his boy, although it had indeed been, "not wisely but too well." And there, among the shadows, arose the old, old stricken cry over the dead and handsome Absalom: "Would to God I had died for thee; for thee, my son, my son!"

CHAPTER IX.

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE.

WHEN the sheriff, Tom Stevens, with a score of rancheros from the Rio Brazos arrived at Magnolia Plantation, they found its owner completely prostrated by grief, and unable to give any satisfactory evidence in regard to the identity of the assassin, or the possible motives for the crime. Indeed the colonel was, at the time, wholly incapable of giving any connected account of the sad affair whatever.

Dr. Maule approached from the house, soon after the arrival of the rancheros upon the scene, having left his patient in the care of Aunt Huldy. He now advised the sheriff to keep his men inside the grove of magnolias, and to have a careful examination of the ground made in the morning. In fact, this appeared to be the only thing that it was possible to do.

As the doctor made this suggestion, he pressed a stimulating mixture upon the colonel, who swallowed it in a listless, dreamy manner, not seeming to take the slightest notice of those around him. The horrors of the night had, for the time being, dazed his mental faculties; but, soon after taking the dose which Dr. Maule administered, he appeared more composed, and began apparently to heed what was passing around him.

"Has the body been moved from its original position, Colonel Carbury?" asked Dr. Maule.

"No," replied the colonel, in a tremulous voice. "He is lying now exactly as he was when I first discovered him."

"The best thing to be done now, Stevens," said the doctor, "is to select a jury, and I will examine the wound in their presence."

"All right, Doc," agreed the sheriff; and twelve men were then marched by a roundabout course, and stationed in the garden path toward the mansion, not far from the body, in order that they might not efface or destroy any signs which might lead to the detection of the murderer, in the clear space in which the tragedy had occurred.

The two negro men who had first discovered the body, with Aunt Huldy and the colonel, were duly sworn and gave their testimony; but this only sufficed to leave the mystery as great a mystery as ever.

"Gentlemen of the jury," said Dr. Maule, "I will now remove the pistol from the hand of poor James Carbury, and pass it around for examination. It is, you may all perceive, a Colt's five-shooter, and still has four loads in the cylinder. Now this fact conclusively proves that the young man did not shoot his sister and then kill himself—an act which, as we all know, he would never have committed, but which would be brought under consideration if the evidence should chance to point in that direction."

The revolver was passed from the hands of one juror to those of another, until it had been duly examined by them all.

"Who has been in company with your son to-day, colonel?" inquired the doctor.

"I do not know. I did not see my son alive since we left the breakfast table this morning."

"Have you any one in your mind who could possibly have had any object or motive in committing such a fearful crime?"

"No one that I know of could have had such a motive," was the colonel's reply. "My poor boy was on the best of terms with every one in

this neighborhood, I believe, if I except young Adler."

"Charles Adler? Indeed! Has there been any quarrel recently, to your knowledge, between the two young men?"

"None, now, or at any previous time—at least none that I am aware of," answered Colonel Carbury.

As the colonel made mention of Charles Adler, the jurors glanced significantly at the doctor and the sheriff, and then from one to another of themselves. It was the first dawning of a fearful suspicion; for there was not one among all the planters and rancheros for many miles around who did not know of the bitter feelings which had so long existed between the Adler and the Carbury families.

So readily will the mind, in such an emergency, lay hold upon the faintest clew, and a trifle, though "light as a feather," becomes to the man who is hungering for the slightest scintilla of evidence, "confirmation strong as proof from holy writ."

"Gentlemen," said Dr. Maule, "I will now proceed to examine the body." And the doctor ran his knife dexterously through the clothing of the murdered man, exposing, as he did so, the bare breast, and disclosing the wound.

After making a careful examination, the doctor again spoke:

"Thomas Stevens, Colonel Carbury, and gentlemen of the jury: I left my patient, a few minutes ago, and came to this spot with a hope that I might possibly be of some assistance in solving the dreadful mystery of this murder, and the attempted murder of that beautiful young lady, Miss Cora Carbury, who is known and beloved by every one in this section of the country. That hope was awakened, in the first place, by the delirious ravings of this murdered young man's sister, of whom I have just spoken. The young lady has been struck on the head, and I am now satisfied, by the same bullet that caused the death of her brother. You will observe, gentlemen, that the ball entered the body at this point, near the spine, and passed between the short ribs ranging upward through the vitals, and then left the body some three inches higher up than the place where it first struck; consequently, it is plain that the assassin must have been crouched upon the ground a little to the rear of his victim, when the cowardly deed was done. This, in my mind, makes the mystery deeper and more difficult of solution than before I made the examination. Why? you will ask. I answer, because James Carbury could not have fired his own pistol, after having received such a wound. Death must have been instantaneous, besides being unexpected from the quarter from which the shot came. And the pistol, being in the murdered man's hand, with one barrel of the same discharged, shows, very plainly, I think, that there must have been an assailant in front of our poor young friend, at the same time that he was fatally attacked from the rear.

"Now, gentlemen, here is the spot where Miss Cora fell. It is marked with her blood. You observe that she was standing very near to her brother when struck, but on higher ground, and the disarranged condition of this flower-bed, which will be more plainly discerned by daylight, shows that she must have come running—and probably to the assistance of her brother—at the very moment of the murder. It is evident, from the situation, that she was on the point of inclosing him in her arms, or throwing herself between his form and that of the assassin.

"In the position in which the murderer must have been, and taking into consideration the range of the bullet, together with the fact that it passed through the poor young man's body, indicates—indeed, to me it proves conclusively—after deciding what must have been the manner of Miss Cora's approach, that the same bullet which caused the death of the brother, laid the sister senseless, by glancing along her skull.

"And now comes the most important evidence, when taken into consideration along with the assertion you have just heard Colonel Carbury make, in regard to his son having been on good terms with every one in the neighborhood, with the single exception of Charles Adler. Miss Cora Carbury, whom I have but now left, in her delirium has repeatedly cried out: 'Don't shoot, Charley! If you love me, don't shoot!'

"Now, as I interpret the evidence, it does

appear positive that some person, by the name of Charles, secreted himself in yonder shrubbery, and by him James Carbury was assassinated in this dastardly manner. At the same time, he doubtless had a confederate posted among the magnolias, to draw the attention of his victim, and fire upon him also, thus rendering his object sure, and easier of accomplishment. Such are my views, gentlemen, and you must decide how much, and how far, they are worthy of being acted upon.

"That this has been a cold-blooded and pre-meditated murder, there can be no doubt in the minds of any of you. I do not suppose—nor is it at all probable—that the assassins, either of them, intended to injure the young lady; in fact, as it appears, she must have come unexpectedly upon the scene, and the murderer, let him be who he may, must have been a familiar friend. If this were not the case, why should she have called him 'Charley'? And what other man of that name is there in this vicinity who could be thus addressed by Miss Cora Carbury, than Charles Adler?"

Every man present stood as if petrified, so convinced were they by the plain and positive statements of Dr. Maule. But, scarcely had he ceased speaking, when Tom Stevens yelled:

"Saddle up, men! Saddle up!" and the jurors rushed, as one man, beneath the magnolias, to their horses.

CHAPTER X. ON THE TRAIL.

"LET loose the blood-hounds! Let loose my blood-hounds!"

Thus shrieked Colonel Carbury as he rushed about the grounds like a maniac, throwing his arms about him wildly in the air.

"Why was it that this did not occur to me before? I would not have believed that Charles Adler could have killed a mouse. But I forgot—it was the deed of a coward, and worthy of the race he springs from. Loose the blood-hounds, I tell you! The cowardly villain has had time to have covered miles in his flight since committing his dastardly deed."

After dashing up and down the garden paths for some moments in this manner, his hands clasped about his forehead and his whole appearance that of a man crazed with grief, the colonel continued:

"Run, Mose! Run for my horse, boy! I will lead the chase—none other than myself should do it. Doctor Maule, will you please attend to having the body of my poor boy removed to the house? If it can possibly be done without the knowledge of his poor mother—for I would keep the news of his death from her, in her weak state, as long as possible—try and so arrange it. Then remain and do what you can for my daughter. Stay by me, my friend, through this terrible night, and I promise you that you shall not go unrewarded. I can never forget what you have already done for me and mine—Dick! Dick, I say!" yelling to another of his slaves, "bring me my revolvers and bowie-knife, do you hear? I'll have the heart's blood of the dastard who has slain my son!"

"Calm yourself, colonel," advised the doctor. "No good ever comes of being too hasty. I sincerely hope that I have not been the means of directing suspicion this night—although it does seem, I must say, to be a certainty—upon an innocent man."

"Sheriff," he then said, turning to that official, who was by this time mounted, "the man must be secured in jail, and you should see that he is protected until Miss Cora recovers and can give her testimony. He must have a fair trial. Do your sworn duty, and remember there must be no lynching in this case. Charles Adler, whatever may have been his conduct in this most sad affair, comes of a good old family; and, besides that, he has a widowed mother who has had a full share of trouble already. Charles, too, has always had the reputation of an exemplary young man, as you all know. Let justice be done, I say, even though the heavens should fall."

At this instant Mose, the negro who had been dispatched by Colonel Carbury for his horse, rushed in frantically among the rancheros with eyes protruding and a face like ashes, and fell prone upon the ground at the feet of his master.

"What in the fiend's name is the matter now?" yelled the colonel; at the same time laying hold upon the man with a gripe of iron, and placing him with a jerk upon his feet.

"Speak, Mose, you worthless rascal, or I'll throttle you!"

"Oh, Marse! Marse Curnil!" said the poor fellow, his teeth chattering the while; "Ole Dan am layin' dead on de stable flo'! He am all blood, Marse Curnil. De ole debil am let loose ter-night, sartin' sho'!"

"Great Heavens!" exclaimed his master in horror. "What does this mean? My hostler murdered too? Get a lantern, Mose, as quickly as you can. Gentlemen, am I going mad? Let loose those blood-hounds, I say! Where are Joe and Jim? Have my slaves all deserted me now when their services are most needed?"

"The poor fellows are terribly frightened, colonel," explained Dr. Maule; "and it is no wonder. You cannot blame them, under such dreadful circumstances. Come, gentlemen, let us go to the stables. Colonel Carbury, where are the hounds kenneled?"

"In the far end of the negro quarters," was the reply. "Here is the lantern, sheriff. Now, Mose, keep your wits about you, and bring out the hounds. Run, boy, I say! Lead these gentlemen to the stables. Come, doctor, the murderers may have left some clew in that direction, which your keen eyes and calm judgment may be able to make something of, and which no one else among us would ever notice. For my own part, I am totally unfit to take an unprejudiced view of anything."

The rancheros, under the lead of Tom Stevens, now galloped up to the stables, and secured their horses to the adjacent trees, while Colonel Carbury and the doctor hastily approached on foot. Then the entire party entered the building, where at once a ghastly and sickening spectacle was presented to their view.

The poor old negro, Dan, lay outstretched upon the stable floor, his garments torn, as if in some deadly struggle and covered with blood; while the same sanguinary fluid was spattered upon all sides both upon flooring and wainscoting.

"There has been a most desperate struggle here—that is evident—and doubtless in the dark," asserted Dr. Maule, "and your poor old slave has had to fight hard for his life, and unarmed at that. The murderer has stabbed him at least half-a-dozen times, with a large bowie knife. Gentlemen, I told you more than one man had been engaged in to-night's bloody work, and this new crime gives my assertion a look of truth, which otherwise might not have been so plain."

"Poor old Dan!" said the colonel, as he took in his own the dead hand of his faithful old servant. "This is the strangest thing of all, gentlemen; for this negro had been—an old family slave of the Adlers, and loved the very ground that Charles walked over. I confess I am utterly at a loss to see what motive there could have been, for him, or indeed any other man, to murder poor honest old Dan."

"I war a-thinkin' jist that same thing 'bout Charley an' Dan, Curn'l Carb'ry," spoke up one of the rancheros quickly; "an' hit 'pears to me that Charley Adler air ther las' man hyerabouts ter hev a dif'culty, with any nigger, an' spesbly Dan. Fact air, all ther blacks thinks a heap o' young Adler."

"The mystery certainly grows deeper, gentlemen," said the doctor; "but here come the hounds."

As Dr. Maule spoke, three huge blood-hounds entered the door, held in leash by Mose, whose eyes were bulging from his head, and his black face turning gray in the uncertain light.

The dogs snuffed the blood-tainted air, and pointing their noses upward, shot out a series of most unearthly howls, that sounded terrific in the confined limits of the stable.

"If we knew who the murderers were, and had any of their clothing, the hounds would take the scent right off," said Tom Stevens, in a decided tone of voice. "The dogs would follow then, dead sure, and run the cusses to their hole, wherever that may be."

As the sheriff ceased speaking, he stooped down, and began straightening out the limbs of the dead negro. While thus engaged he suddenly cried out:

"Hullo! What's this? Here's a clew, boys, sure's you're born!" And he drew out from beneath one of the legs of the murdered slave, a bloodstained handkerchief, holding it up as he did so, to the gaze of all.

"Loose the hounds once more!" yelled the colonel.

"Stop half a second! Hold the lantern this

way, will you?" ordered the doctor, as he took the square piece of cambric from the hand of Tom Stevens.

After a brief examination, the last speaker added:

"Gentlemen, here is another link in the chain, which is more direct and conclusive evidence than any yet, and seems to knock some of our reasoning sky-high. I leave it to you if it does not clear up the mystery somewhat. This handkerchief is marked with indelible ink. In one corner there is a name, and that name, by heavens, is

"CHARLES ADLER!"

CHAPTER XI.

TANGLED THREADS.

"I DOESN'T keer a dang!" broke out the ranchero, who had once before spoken in favor of the young man, toward whom the evidence pointed as the assassin. "Uncle Dan mought ha' picked that rag up hisself, anywhar roun' the bayou; an' hit's my 'pinion hit am jest what he did do. Anyway I asserwates, boyees, that Charley Adler never stuck Uncle Dan, an' I'm willin' ter bet my sculp on hit!"

"You appear to be particularly friendly to a man, who is undoubtedly a most cowardly murderer, Phil Munroe!" spoke up the colonel, indignantly.

"Ya as, curn'l, I reckon I'm a friend ter all men what's squar' an' white, an' this hyer boy what everybody is so ready ter 'spect, was one that filled the bill every time."

The behavior of the hounds now drew the attention of all hands, and doubtless brought to an end what might otherwise have been a war of words; for the dogs had been smelling about the floor for a few moments, and then sprung, with long-drawn howls, into one of the vacant stalls.

"Pull your barkers!" cried Phil Munroe. "Ther murderin' cusses air in ther stable, an' Charley Adler ain't with 'em, bet yer last dubbleon on it!"

All sprung on the instant around the corner of the harness-room after the hounds, when, to their surprise, they discovered a bar of light shining into the stall from an aperture through which the dogs at once sprung.

"Half a dozen of you go out, and station yourselves around the building! Shoot any man who attempts to escape from the barn, if you cannot take him alive. Two of you stand guard here! Now, colonel," added the sheriff, after giving these orders, "we'll have to burst in the door of the harness-room. The villains may be secreted in the closets, and the door is locked."

"There is no need of that," said the doctor, who was again examining the dead negro. "Here is a key in Uncle Dan's pocket which, no doubt, belongs to that door."

"You are right, doctor," said Colonel Carbury, as he took the key from his hand, and bounded to the side of the sheriff.

In a second the door was opened, and half a dozen deadly tubes were pointed inside; but, with the exception of the dogs, that were snuffing about the table and chairs, the room was empty.

"What is all this, gentlemen?" exclaimed Sheriff Stevens. "More mystery here! Do you keep a club-room in your stable, colonel? Here are brandy, glasses, cigars, and cards. Old Dan must have been enjoying himself before he got his through ticket for the unknown regions."

"Poor Dan has had nothing to do with this part of the business," said the colonel, very decidedly. "He never drank, neither did he know one card from another."

"And I do not believe he had twenty dollar gold pieces to wager, either," said the doctor, as he picked up several of these coins from beneath the table. "Gentlemen, I can tell you one thing there has been a big game played in this room to-night. Here are papers in which have evidently been rolled thousands of dollars in coin, and the paper, as you see, is old blanks belonging to the Brazos Bank."

"The Brazos Bank?" questioned the colonel, anxiously. "That is where I deposit. Let me examine them."

"Open those closets, Mr. Stevens," suggested Dr. Maule; "we may find there something which may be of service as evidence."

With revolver in hand, cocked and ready, the sheriff proceeded on the inspection; but nothing except harness was found, until the last closet was opened. There, to the astonishment of all, even of Colonel Carbury him-

self, a set of shelves was revealed, upon which were various kinds of wines, liquors and cigars, besides packages of playing-cards and several suits of clothes, the latter hanging at one side.

"Whose are these clothes, colonel?" asked the sheriff.

The colonel approached, with a new look of trouble upon his face, and glancing at them, replied:

"They belong to my son, my poor boy James, although I am at a loss to know why they were kept in such a place."

"Hit's es plain es ther nose on a alligator, curn'l," said Phil Munroe. "Jim an' somebody hes bin in ther habit o' playin' keards hyer. Fact air, they hes bin hyer this very evenin', fer ther brandy spilt on ther table hain't dry till yit. Charley Adler doesn't drink nor play keards, I'll swar hit; so the question now air, who ther galoot war what was with James Carbury. I'm a-thinkin' that all ther bloody biz commenced right hyer, at this hyer table, an' through too much brandy et that. Somebody's been an' lost a heap o' money fer sure."

"Hank Roberts was with James a great deal lately," said Tom Stevens. "The two were always together, weren't they, colonel?"

"They were quite intimate associates, I believe," admitted Colonel Carbury, but with very evident reluctance. "I now know where my son has kept himself so much of late. This Hank Roberts must be found."

"Keep the hounds here awhile, boys," said Dr. Maule, who had been standing for a minute or two wrapped in deep thought. "It appears to me that, as Phil has reasoned, a game of cards has recently been played at this table, ending in a dispute of some kind between the parties engaged, and that dispute culminated in a fight up at the Magnolias afterward; or else that James Carbury having won, the loser followed and killed him. Then discovering that Uncle Dan had witnessed the affair, he, or they, followed the poor old negro and killed him also. It looks only reasonable to suppose that James must have locked some party, or parties, into this room, gave the key to Dan, and then started probably for the house. Whoever they may have been, they escaped, and followed for revenge. Perhaps Dan was left for a guard, and the poor old slave was the first who was murdered."

"Who it was that poor James Carbury locked in this room, and what his object was for doing so, must be found out. Then, and not until then, will the mystery be cleared up. It is a strange affair all through, and very puzzling."

"The proofs, however, seem positive and conclusive against young Adler—James and his friend, or friends, might have captured Adler, and locked him up, and it may have been he, who escaping in the dark, killed Uncle Dan, without knowing that it was his former slave. I certainly would advise letting the dogs take the scent from this room, if they will do so."

"Here they go, then!" called out the sheriff, pulling the board away from the back of the closet as he spoke.

The hounds made a rush, their noses to the floor, snuffing here and there, with lightning-like motions of their heads, while the whole party went out into the main floor to watch them.

Direct to the murdered negro they went, and then dashed madly out of the stable door.

"Mount and follow them!" yelled the sheriff, and in a moment after, the rancheros were in their saddles, spurring through the magnolias after the dogs.

Following a winding scert, the latter at length came to a stop within the thick bush that had concealed Hank Roberts, where they howled fiercely for a moment.

"Did I not tell you that the assassin shot from that point?" cried out the doctor, as he came running up. "The same man who butchered Uncle Dan, killed poor James Carbury."

As Dr. Maule spoke, the boy Mose led a horse, fully equipped, to where the colonel, who had followed him, was standing. The old gentleman instantly sprung into the saddle, buckled his arms about his waist, and turned to the doctor to repeat his last injunction:

"See that my son's body is properly cared for, and watch over my wife and Cora till I return!"

Then, yelling to the blood-hounds, as with terrible and apalling howls they dashed down the bank, he cried:

"Spur, men! Spur! Keep up with the dogs! A thousand dollars for Charles Adler, dead or alive!"

Away thundered the entire posse, Colonel Carbury and Tom Stevens in the lead, and close upon the hounds, that by a roundabout way led back to the stables, and to the side of the dead slave; then turning, with savage yelps, they sprung through the door, around the barn, and away like the wind in the direction of the Adler plantation.

At last the tangled threads seemed to be gathered, and the line, if followed up, to lead to the home of the man to whom the hand of suspicion had first pointed.

CHAPTER XII.

THE FLIGHT FOR LIFE.

CHARLES ADLER, flying from the scene of the mysterious tragedy, in a state bordering on madness, rushed through the dark shades of the magnolias, and the head of the bayou, and was soon running at the top of his speed along the crescent-shaped drive that was opposite his home.

In a few moments' space he had been hurled from the heights of supreme happiness into the blackest depths of misery and hopeless despair.

The future was filled with dread, and without one ray of hope, and an ignominious and cruel death was all that now awaited him.

With the glittering castles which he had built in his imagination, but which he resolved should become realities, he could now have no more to do. All the resolutions, which he so late had formed for the good of his fellow-men, were now forgotten; all the high principles which he had, by long study and much thought, determined to adopt for life-long practice, were now drowned in the immeasurable and intense hatred and detestation which he felt toward the unknown assassin who had blighted his life forever.

That there could be a man, upon the earth so fiendish, as to contrive and accomplish so devilish a deed he would not have believed one short hour previous. And he now felt assured that the same man who had been acquainted with him from his earliest childhood, and had, in spite of all his prejudice, never known him to swerve from the path of duty, truth, and honor, would, in a few short hours, be clamoring for his blood. Not only this, but—the thought seemed to tear through his brain like a jagged bullet—she, the angel of his adoration, would doubtless herself hound on the mob upon his tracks; her testimony would condemn him to the deadly noose.

No wonder that the young man's brain grew like molten lead, and reason tottered in the balance.

Springing upon the veranda—two steps at a time—his hair flying in wild disorder, his clothing torn and stained, as were his hands with blood from his wound, Charles halted at the main entrance to the house, for, stretched across the door-sill, was a little negro, fast asleep.

"Poor little Pomp!" he muttered. "It is a pity to awaken you. I would gladly, this night, change position, name and race with you, for nevermore can I know rest or peace upon the earth. The blood that has been spilled by another brands me as a murderer. I must not awaken you, or you too will be a witness against me."

Rushing up the stairs to his room, he quickly lit a candle, and then threw himself upon a lounge.

"Great heavens!" he exclaimed; "my cross is heavier than I can bear. Blood, blood upon my hands, and upon my clothes! Blood upon everything that I touch! I shall go mad, and in my despair rush back to meet the mob, who will at least relieve me through death of my horrible torment!"

Bathing his hands, he threw the water from the window, and then laved his head.

He then removed his coat, and discovered that the sleeve was perforated by a bullet, also that it and his undergarments as well were stained with blood—his own blood, thank God! and not that of a fellow-creature; and, though he realized that he had been wounded, he felt thankful, amid all the horror of his position, that he was guiltless of that of another.

Upon examining his shoulder, he found that the ball had merely plowed a furrow through the surface flesh, and, washing the wound, he applied some healing salve, and then some strips of adhesive plaster. He now knew that

James Carbury had indeed fired his pistol at him, and that some third party had shot his opponent dead, and wounded Cora. The report of the revolver had been very loud; this he remembered, and he knew that some person or persons must have been secreted in the shrubbery, and had taken advantage of his position in the duel into which he was forced, to fire when James Carbury gave the word—thus, for some unknown reason, killing James, and fixing the murder upon himself—for murder it would in any event be considered, as there had been no seconds.

That the same bullet which killed her brother had wounded Cora did not occur to Charles, as there was no reason in such a supposition, and the fact that she had been wounded was to him the most mysterious part of the whole mysterious affair.

However, it did now occur to him, and very forcibly and regrettably, too, that he had been so excited and so overwhelmed with horror, that he had not looked about the scene of the duel and ascertained if other parties were in view, or searched the shrubbery for a concealed assassin.

After hastily removing his clothes and attireing himself in hunting costume, he opened a trunk, took from it a pair of Colt's navy revolvers and a bowie knife; these he buckled round his waist, saying to himself as he did so:

"Little did I think when I purchased these pistols that I should ever need them except in the chase; but now the weapons may be useful in defending myself against my maddened fellow-men. Had I taken the life of another, unless it were that of some ruffian which I had been forced to take in self-defense, or to save that of another, I would gladly welcome death in any shape or form rather than suffer the hell upon earth into which such a deed would plunge me; but I am innocent of harming any human being, even in thought, and I will live! It is my right! I will live to see justice done upon the fiend who has committed this base and cowardly murder—yes, I will track the demon, in the guise of mankind, to his death, and I will choke a confession from his dying lips. Justice, I dedicate my life from henceforth to thee! James Carbury shall be avenged, and my name vindicated. Cora, my lost darling, the day will yet come when you will wish the bullet had been buried in your brain ere you spoke the words that branded me—an innocent man—a cowardly murderer!"

As Charles Adler turned he saw his reflection in the mirror, and he started back aghast, exclaiming:

"Heavens, what a change! I would not have known myself. The scenes through which I have passed in one hour this night have aged me more than years could have done. But I must hasten."

Brushing out his long, dark-brown hair, he hastily thrust a black, wide-brimmed hat upon his head, and, putting what money he had in his possession in his saddle-bags, he rushed down the stairs to the front entrance, and laying hold on the sleeping negro boy he set him on his feet, saying, as the little fellow yawned and rubbed his eyes:

"Come, Pomp, shake yourself, and saddle Thunder Cloud. Be just as lively as you can about it. Then stay by the horse until I come to the stable."

"Golly! Marse Charley, whar yo gwine?" asked the little darky in amazement. "Dis yere ain't no night fer coons an' ef you is bound to de bottom, weuns doesn't want no boss."

"Do as I tell you, Pomp. I am not going to hunt; but I am, or very shortly will be, hunted myself. I am going away, and may never see you again; but don't you ever believe anything wrong that anybody may say about me, will you?"

"Gol a'mighty! Marse Charley, you isn't never done nuffin' out de way—I knows dat. An' ef you's goin' away dis here little nig am jes' gwine ter cry hisself ter deff. Don't ye go fer ter tell me dat yer is, Marse Charley?"

"It is true, Pomp; but hurry up. You don't want the blood-hounds to tear me to pieces, do you? I am in great danger. You will know all about it in the morning."

Filled with the greatest perplexity, anxiety and grief, little Pomp ran to the stables, taking his young master's saddle-bags with him, and Charles turned aside into the library, and dashed off two letters—the first to his mother, which he left upon the table; the other, he sealed, and addressed to

"MISS CORA CARBURY, "Magnolia Plantation."

This done the unhappy youth walked briskly to the stable, where Pomp stood holding by the bridle a powerfully built stallion, black as midnight, that neighed at the approach of his master.

"Here, Pomp," said Charles, handing the boy the letter; "keep this until you can deliver it secretly to Aunt Huldy, over at Magnolia Plantation. Tell her to give it to Miss Cora, when no one is about to see her receive it."

"Oh, Gol a'mighty! What am dat, Marse Charley?" cried poor little Pomp, trembling with fear as he took the letter.

"What is it that you see, Pomp?"

"I doesn't see nuffin', Marse Charley; but doesn't ye hear dat? Listen!"

"They are after me, Pomp! Hide in the stable, my boy! The blood-hounds are on my trail. Good-by!"

Springing into the saddle, Charley Adler gave a low whistle, as Pomp darted into the stable, and the black horse Thunder Cloud bounded away up the Brazos toward the west, like a dry leaf before a norther.

CHAPTER XIII.

OFF THE TRAIL.

CALM as the placid waters of the Gulf, was the broad expanse of prairie, over which Colonel Carbury, Tom Stevens and his posse rode more slowly, on their return from their fruitless chase on the day that followed.

Calm and broad, seemingly limitless in its expanse, stretching away until sky and savanna seemed to meet, was this boundless expanse. It was now the afternoon, "in a land where it seems always afternoon," of the day succeeding the one that had brought death, and a sorrow that was worse than death, into two homes which had been before, at least, peaceful ones.

The glory of the long summer day was slowly fading before the approach of the cool and lengthened shadows, and the prairie had all the appearance of resting, like the sea in a calm, with no object upon its broad bosom to break or to mar its solitude—none, except the exhausted steeds and their equally worn-out riders, returning to Magnolia Plantation, dejected and disappointed in their thirst for blood.

"I will find him yet! I swear it!" said the father of the murdered man, now more maddened by his great grief than ever. "I will find the cowardly miscreant, if I track the wide universe from end to end, until my dying day. He shall not escape me!"

"We are off the scent for the present," said the sheriff; "but never fear. We are dead sure to get track of him yet before he reaches the Rio Grande. What do you think, Phil?"

"I hopes that we may, Tom," was the reply of Phil Munroe, "ef 'tis a younker what I heellers banked heavy on. But dog'd et I lieve it oun ter him till yit!"

It is needless to say that the subject of these remarks was Charles Adler, whose trail they fully believed they had struck, when, leaving the stables, to which the murderer had evidently returned after the killing of James Carbury, he had gone direct to those of the Adler plantation, beyond a doubt to secure a horse for his flight. Phil Munroe, it will be seen, was still faithful in the face of the most convincing appearances to the contrary.

But the pursuers were speedily baffled on leaving the home of Charles Adler.

Scarce five minutes after the young man, mounted on Thunder Cloud, the fastest steed for many miles around, had fled like the wind from the coming avengers of blood, and his little negro body-servant had crawled tremblingly, and with suppressed sobs, into one of stalls, the blood-hounds dashed wildly into the stable. Around and through it they scoured, darting out almost instantly, and without pausing to notice the terrified Pomp, who lay, crouched in the smallest conceivable compass, in the darkest of the gloomy corners.

Across the lawn and through the heavy timber, followed close by the horsemen, who, by this time, had come up with them, went the dogs. But the dark and sluggish waters of the bayou lay near them, and here the scent was lost. Following it up and down for some distance, the band having divided their forces for the purpose, they sought in vain for some time to strike the trail. Then they crossed the

bayou in a body, feeling confident they could not fail to come up with it on the opposite side; but the search was still fruitless. The hounds were completely baffled, and the long night was one of labor and disappointment to the sheriff and his retainers, who had started on their quest with the full assurance of a speedy and successful issue.

After a rest of some hours, and having partaken of refreshments at a plantation house some miles distant, they continued the now uncertain pursuit by riding to a point at which it was almost certain the fleeing assassin would touch on his way to the Rio Grande—for it was taken for granted by every member of the party that the great frontier stream would be the fugitive's objective point. The place, for which the early dawn found them riding rapidly as before, was one which the murderer would be able to reach by going in any one of some half a dozen directions, and as they had failed in striking the trail, the suggestion of Tom Stevens that they endeavor to come up with it at the blasted oak on the edge of the llanos, was received with universal favor. Hero they all believed it would be next to impossible to miss it, and they did not despair of getting information that would identify him, from an old Texan half-breed who lived upon a ranch near at hand. But the blood-hounds were still at fault, and the mestizo ranchero had neither seen nor heard of any one answering the description given of the escaped criminal.

Charles Adler had passed the blasted oak, if indeed he had come in that direction, at an hour when everything at the ranch was wrapped in sleep, and there was no trace of his having halted. Besides, it was now certain positive that he had not touched at this point in his flight, since the dogs had failed to come up with the trail. The scent, which will not lie on the water, had been dropped at the bayou, and the point at which they would be able again to take it up—whether up or down the stream from the place at which it was evident that the fugitive had crossed—had not been discovered. Hence the return of the cavalcade, weary and dispirited.

To Lafayette Cartury, who, in this long and almost silent return from the chase, there was abundant space for thought and retrospection. The reflections which were ever upon him, rising and floating above the bitter pain, memory of the grief that by this time was deep and noiseless, were of the bitterest kind. It would seem, he thought continually, that the sins, not only of his youth, but of his manhood in old age, were now, at the late eventide, coming home, like the well-known domestic fowls, to roost.

Reckless he had been through the six decades of existence which had been his. Neither by precept nor example had he ever sought to influence for good those around him, and least of all, the poor boy who now lay in his winding-sheet at the Magnolias, and whom he had indulged in every whim and folly and excess, forgetting that sooner or later "the end of these things is death."

More than once in the years that were past, had Colonel Carbury brought himself and family to the verge of ruin in a single night at the card-table; but this was neither known nor suspected, for he was never irritable over his losses, and the consequence was that even those who knew their amount, never blamed them to be of material importance with him.

But the fickle goddess never deserted her votary for any length of time, and soon he would find himself again upon his feet, and that more firmly than ever. His own success, and the fact that, notwithstanding he had always been in the habit of imbibing ardent spirits to a greater or less extent, made him easier on the subject of his son; though he was far from knowing the full extent of the young man's gambling and debauchery. But, suddenly and fearfully, had come the culmination of it all, and the feelings of the bereaved father—and a fond, almost criminally fond father he had been—were more agonizing than pen can portray. In his bitter self-accusations, as well as his sorrow for the dead, and his mad dream of vengeance, he never once through the long day thought of those who might, or might not, be still among the living at Magnolia Plantation. Of the bereaved mother, to whom the stroke could scarce fail to be fatal; and who must, ere this, have been informed of the tragic fate of her boy. Of Cora, wounded and perhaps dying, tossing in the wild delirium of fever on her couch, and

with the one appealing cry hardly absent from her fevered lips:

"Don't shoot, Charley! If you love me, don't shoot!"

The shadows were fast falling upon the prairie, and faster and heavier upon the heart and the brief years that remained of the life of the master of the Magnolias; shadows which no bright sunlight could ever drive away. Longer, deeper, and darker they fell, on the face of the broad prairie, and into the soul of Lafayette Carbury. Soon the bright beams from the day-god were extinguished in "day's golden death," and there was gloom upon all, and upon all around. Then, the pale moon sailed upward into the blue depths of the mighty canopy, and cast its silvery radiance upon the ocean of land beneath—land which now fanned by the evening breeze from the Mexique, had the strongest likeness, in the billowy undulations of the long prairie grass, to the waves of the sea.'

Though still erect and of fine physique, Colonel Carbury had for a long time previous to his introduction to our readers, the look of one who was old for his years. Though tall, and well-formed, as well as passably handsome, his face had never been one that would command admiration, or even confidence. The life of a fast and decidedly selfish man had made its impress, as it never fails to do; but for all that, the colonel had been up to this time a fairly presentable and tolerably well-preserved gentleman of sixty.

But to those who rode by his rein this day, on their long ride back toward the Brazos, the stern old planter seemed to have at once grown bent, as though by years, and enfeebled, as though by physical suffering. He had set out on the trail of his son's murderer with all the fire and energy of youth. He had sworn to lead the chase, and he had done so while it lasted. He had vowed to lave his hands in the heart's blood of the destroyer of the hope of his house, and he was returning, with the look of a man aged and broken, his vow unkept, his vengeance still doomed to sleep, perchance never to awaken.

Yet, foiled for the present though he was, and, after the undue excitement of the terrible night that was past, and which had buoyed him up for the moment, had left him, weak almost as a child, he never faltered in his sanguinary resolve.

"I will find the dastardly assassin," he would repeat over and over again. "I will find him, though it be at the end of the world, and the end also of my life!"

He was almost at his home now. The motley-looking equestrian party, coming across the wide open space in the clear moonlight, at length saw in front of them the dark shade of the magnolia grove. Here, at the entrance to the plantation, they were to separate; Tom Stevens, to his home to lay plans for the morrow; his mounted escort, to their respective habitations, there, it might be to await further orders; and Colonel Carbury, to his own bereaved household, by himself.

And what might not be before him now, when he crossed his threshold once more? What new horror might not the past four-and-twenty hours have brought down upon the once untroubled calm of that domestic sea? Turbid though its depths had been, the surface had been unvailed until now; but, once shaken to its depths, what fresh form of evil might not come uppermost? God knows, there was much that he well knew of, which himself and his now dead son had done and left undone, that might bring down a speedy retribution! The bitter end might not be yet.

Lights were visible in two or three of the upper windows, although it was past the usual hour for such a sight in that retired home. But the time was anything but an ordinary one. A dim illumination was also visible in the large square parlor on the ground floor. This he noticed; and then, the half-score or more of sleeping negroes, resting in various attitudes on the floor of the front veranda. Not one of these stirred from his position, or was aware of the arrival of their master, until having dismounted near the entrance and approached the steps, his two favorite watch-dogs recognized his approach, and greeted him with a friendly bark.

Then his man, Mose, started up with a cry, and ran forward to take his master's horse. It was no word of welcome or salutation which met the ear of Colonel Carbury; and, failing to catch its import he looked inquiringly into

the face of the negro. With a pathos that is indescribable, the two brief words were repeated:

"My mist'ess!"

With the strength of youth, or rather of the night previous, with one bound, Colonel Carbury without a word sprung upon the veranda, and in three or four more, reached the lighted room above.

CHAPTER XIV.

AND ALL FOR NAUGHT.

"GONE! And for what?"

It was a lady, and one in the prime of middle life, still handsome and of a fine presence, who thus exclaimed, more in anger than grief, as she glanced over a crumpled and blotted sheet of note-paper which she had just found on the library table. It was the morning after the tragedy at the Magnolias; the scene was the Adler mansion; the lady was the mother of Charles Adler.

Adelaide Adler had not set eyes upon her son since their parting in anger, immediately after their early dinner on the previous day. But she was an affectionate mother in her way, though a narrow-minded and somewhat selfish, as well as passionate and prejudiced one, it must be confessed; and knowing, too, the fond and amiable disposition of Charles, had looked forward with pleasurable anticipations to meeting him this morning at the breakfast table. The reader knows of the disappointment that awaited her.

There had been no news brought up to this time of the tragic affair at Magnolia Plantation; and little Pomp, the only one of the household who had been disturbed the night before, kept the little which he knew as closely as he did the letter that had been given him by his young master for Cora Carbury.

After her solitary breakfast, Mrs. Adler, in no very pleasant mood, sought the library, hoping there to see her son; for her offended pride would not yet permit of her going, or even sending, to his apartment.

So it was that her eyes at once fell upon the letter which Charles had written so hastily on the eve of his flight.

"MOTHER, my dear mother," it began—"you will let me call you so, if it be for the last time—I am leaving my home—I go to-night! Believe nothing that you hear except that I am innocent. James Carbury is dead—murdered—but not by my hand. We met indeed, as you wildly hoped we one day might do, in a hostile manner; but he was mad, intoxicated—and I was forced into it. He fell, shot by some one whom I know not, but whom I am bound to trace. I shot in the air. You may believe this, my mother, for I swear it. Cora was also hurt, but by whom is also a mystery. I cannot fail to be accused of the crime, for she saw and recognized me. There is no safety but in flight; and though life without Cora Carbury is not worth living for, I must live to track the murderer who has to-night blighted my whole life."

"Farewell, my mother. May we meet some day, when we shall be more in sympathy than we have been of late. Be good to poor Cora, for my sake, should it ever be in your power. If I live—but no matter. May God bless and comfort you!"

"I feel that the blood-hounds will soon be on my trail, and I must not tarry. Good-by!"

Your wretched son,

"CHARLEY."

"Gone! And for what?"

Like most mothers of only sons, fond though she had been of him, and selfish in her fondness, Adelaide Adler had not been without matrimonial visions for her boy.

The one thing needful, in the poor lady's estimation, was that Charles should seek for more money in the bride he was one day—and she hoped a not very distant one—to bring to Fair Oaks; the home to which she was so much attached, and which she resolutely refused to part with, but which, since her husband's death, had been so sadly embarrassed and shorn of its splendor. This had been her hope for years.

Her boy could afford to dispense with family, that great desideratum with the upper strata of Southern society in the old days; if he could not—a scion of the houses of Adler and Clarke, with the best blood in the blue grass region in his veins—pray, who was there in the whole land that could?

Charles was, it was true, of a silent and rather self-contained nature, never demonstrative or effusive in the least; but then, there had never been a vein of positivism in his composition, and the good lady's plans for him did not seem at all difficult of accomplishment. This, of course, was previous to the effectual opening of Mrs. Adler's eyes, as to the true state of things between her son and the heiress of the Magnolias.

The pretty little Cora, had she stood alone, though not entirely upon her own sweet merits,

would have been quite acceptable as a daughter-in-law. Her dower would have been sufficient to have added the much wished-for finishing glory to Fair Oaks; but she was a Carbury, and nothing but the waters of Lethe could wipe out such a stain.

And Charles, the amiable and yielding Charles, had withstood his lady mother to the face. He had declared his desire to be on friendly terms with the whole race of the adversary. He had denounced his mother's feelings in the matter, as heathenish and wicked, and he had wound up by declaring that Cora Carbury, if possible, and none but she should be his wife. To the widow of the injured Kenton Adler, this, from the last scion of the Adler house, was well-nigh insupportable. Was the feud of the Montagues and the Capulets to end in such a way? No! Rather let it close, like its prototype, in the tomb of the lovers!

So she had said in her heart when, in her anger, she had slammed the door in the face of her boy—the face she might never look upon again. Blood, she had warned him, would come of his unnatural going over in this manner to the enemy, and blood had indeed come. But by whom? And for what? These were the questions which she put to herself now in vain, and which poor Charles himself had been unable to answer.

One thing alone seemed certain. James Carbury was dead. Yes; Charles had declared that he had not shot him, although saying that all the appearances were against him. And, strange and dreadful as it may seem, the one regret with the haughty and injured woman when the crushing news came to her, was that he had not fallen by the hand of her son. Who, but the son of Kenton Adler should have been destined thus to bring retribution upon Lafayette Carbury? Fate, in dealing thus harshly with her enemies, had, she felt, dealt unkindly and inconsiderately with her.

Charles had asked her to believe in his innocence in the face of everything; and she would do so, for he was truth personified. But, in her heart of hearts, she would have gloried in knowing him to be guilty. If, when forced by James Carbury, as the letter said, to defend himself, he had shot and killed his assailant, she would have felt that her husband could now, at last, rest in his grave.

And for this—for what? as she asked herself the question—her boy had gone; was henceforth to be a fugitive and a vagabond on the face of the earth. He had fled, not that he might save his life, he said, but that he might devote it to tracking out—whom?—the man who had rid the world of her pet aversion, James Carbury!

That wretched doll-faced girl had caused it all, and he would be true to her now, even unto death. She, too, would probably cling to his memory in spite of everything, and believe in his innocence. What if she had seen and recognized him, as he declared? Cora Carbury, in her sweet simplicity, was just the kind of a girl who would never lose her faith in one she loved, though the whole evidences of all her senses should be loud against him.

One would suppose that such a thought, such a belief in the stricken girl, would have softened the heart of Charles Adler's mother toward her, but it had just the contrary effect. What business had Cora Carbury to believe in her son at all? It was just as unnatural and uncalled for as her son's desire to be on amicable terms with the Carbury family.

She could have endured the banishment of her boy with the submission of a Spartan mother, had he confessed to her in this farewell missive that he had taken the life of his enemy. She would have shut herself up in her haughty seclusion more closely than ever, as feeling that she had nothing in the present to cling to, that the future held out no bow of promise, and that she must henceforth live only in the past. But she would have done that in the bravest, though it might not be the best spirit in the world. Her son, though she never again might see him, had been the Nemesis of his race, and the avenging blow had come from the Adlers.

To a woman with the proud, unyielding spirit of the mistress of Fair Oaks, to say nothing of her vindictive and unforgiving nature, the situation in that event would have been akin to a happy one. She was as relentless as a Comanche. Some strain of Indian blood in the veins of her much-boasted ancestors, the Clarkes of Kentucky, had the mastery with her; and, when we think of its very

possible results under circumstances that would favor its free action, we may charitably hope that it was less sin than insanity.

But how would it be now? She must, and she would be silent, no matter what came of it. No one should ever know from her whether her son had left even a word of farewell. She could safely say that she had not seen him once on that terrible night. Proud, colder, more reserved than ever, she would become during the remainder of her life. Its remainder—ay, there was the rub. She must live on, for long years, perhaps, though there was nothing now on earth to live for. The boon of death, so often rashly and piteously prayed for by weaker women than herself, can never be had for the asking.

"No one ever understood me," said this worse than bereaved mother, as she destroyed the note which she had read and re-read. "I never could act like the common herd. I cannot be tame, and self-repressed, and prudent, as it is the fashion to say instead of hypocritical. With me it has always been—do all, dare all, risk all, whether I suffer or am happy. Well, I have missed my vengeance, it seems. It has slipped out of my hands. But I will not weep and fret over it, though the fates have been so adverse. Neither will I lament over the disgrace and banishment of my son!"

Thus did the lonely lady at Fair Oaks steel her heart to every softer feeling of woman's nature, and only exclaim in bitterness, when she thought of the good and noble boy who was now outlawed—"Gone! And for what?"

CHAPTER XV.

THE SON OF HER SORROW.

THE patient, long-suffering wife of Colonel Carbury was dead.

Life may be borne for the entire length of the allotted period before sorrow looses the silver cord; but sometimes, in mercy, the bitter tie which binds the sufferer to earth is severed with but little warning. So it had been with her. Life, it is said, is impossible without hope; and, as the only anchor of the poor, feeble woman for years had been the frail one now cut loose, as in a moment, she no longer clung to existence.

The love of Lafayette Carbury for the once beautiful woman, who had been

"The more than Michal of his bloom,
The Abishag of his age,"

if we may dignify his evanescent passion with the name, had scarcely survived the birth of their son. On him he had centered all his affections since that moment, and had been jealous of any affection which the child might exhibit toward his mother. But James soon outgrew this. To his wife, Colonel Carbury was always studiously polite, and in her presence was very rarely rude or boisterous. The truth was, she was one of those gentle little creatures, with a perfect repose of manner, who always act as a sedative on a more mercurial temperament. All the same, however, the colonel was invariably courteous and considerate in his treatment of her, especially after she became so much of an invalid, and the probability is that the thought never once occurred to him that she might have anything whereof to complain.

His son—the ill-fated James—he had loved devotedly. Now that he was gone, it is possible that, in his great sorrow, he might have been drawn nearer to the uncomplaining woman who had shared his joys and sorrows for more than a quarter of a century. But now, she had been taken from him also.

There was Cora, it was true—though she had never been more than a secondary predicate—but she might be, even now, on her death-bed. There was nothing, the stricken man groaned in agony of spirit, left for him to live for. Under the first stroke of this new bereavement, he forgot, for the time, his oath of vengeance.

Poor Mrs. Carbury! The end had come speedily. Kindly and as cautiously as it could be done, Dr. Maule had communicated to the invalid mother the fearful news, when it was no longer possible to keep the knowledge from her. Contrary to his fears, she had received it mildly and submissively, with no frantic outburst of grief; but, none the less, her heart was broken. It was the last stroke that the spirit, so long stretched to its utmost tension, could bear. There was not sufficient vitality left in her enfeebled frame to make the faintest struggle to murmur in its immortal tenement. The doctor held her hand, and said, in his kind way,

the platitudes which are thought the right thing to be said on such occasions, and she listened quietly, thanking him with a sad smile when he had finished. Then, in the same passive way, she took the quieting potion which he administered, and which she so little needed, and soon fell into a quiet sleep.

An hour afterward, the physician, who still lingered at the plantation, carrying out the injunctions of the colonel, left the bedside of the now sleeping Cora, and entered the apartment of her mother.

Mrs. Carbury no longer slept. The awakening had come; but it was on the other side.

It was a fit ending for such a life. The bitter cup that was held to her lips at the last, she had barely tasted; then smiled sweetly, and fell asleep.

Hers had been no uncommon lot in life. Recognizing the fact that her husband's love was no longer hers, she threw out all the tendrils of her fond, true heart to her first-born. He proved, alas! as so many do, an object all unworthy of it; but what of that? All the more fondly and passionately did she love the boy; although, in her case, unfortunately for her peace of mind, love was anything but blind. To his doting father, James Carbury was to the last, Benjamin, the son of his right hand; to his patient, hopeful mother, he was Benoni, the son of her sorrow.

But she forgave him everything, and loved him, if it was possible to do so, only the more. Her whole being had gradually become absorbed in him. She loved him, from the first hour of his birth, with all the intense strength of a really strong nature—strong to endure and suffer. The pretty girl-baby, who was born to her some seven years later, was her pet, but the boy was her idol. She almost literally gloated over his bright and vivid beauty, his wit and intelligence, and his really loving nature. If she knew his faults, which she did, and believed in her heart that he was falling into habits of dissipation, she still hoped and believed that her love for him, and his for her, would be his safeguard, and that she would live to see him honored and beloved by all.

This hope, as has been said, was her sheet anchor. It was cut loose, and the frail bark could only drift; but it soon was wafted into the haven where she would be.

It was upon this quiet wreck of one of his few remaining hopes, that Colonel Carbury came, when he dashed so wildly up the stairs, and into the chamber, where, after "life's fitful fever," his gentle and faithful help-mate "slept well."

Flinging himself, with a deep groan, that seemed drawn agonizingly from the innermost depths of his soul, by the side of the couch whereon all that was mortal of her rested, he lay there prone upon the floor, worn out in body and spirit, until a new day dawned upon them. Then, once more, the cold, gray, forbidding realities of daily life forced themselves upon him. The thoughts of the daughter who was alive, and the son who was dead, and which had not visited him since the last shock had come to him, now returned. The new day brought with it sad duties, and duties which must be performed.

Suns arise and shine in this world, and they shine just as brightly upon the dead as upon the living, upon a coffin-lid as upon a dial. The dread white steel and its grim rider pass over the earth in their ceaseless round of destruction, pausing here and there, but leaving few marks upon the trail, and fewer outward signs upon those who witness and survive it. The brightness gone out of a youthful face, an added line or two on an older one, or a few more silver threads in the changing hair; these are nearly ever the only tokens which tell of wrecked hearts, and ruined hopes, and all the terrible storms of anguish which so stirred the depths, and left—calm though the surface be now—the precious freightage, which was carried through life's voyage, at the bottom forever.

The new day saw the remains of James Carbury and his mother laid side by side under the shadows of the magnolias; and the husband and father, in his double anguish, believed at the moment, that they were equally mourned by him.

Cora still lay unconscious, her fever at its height; but she no longer called the name of Charles Adler, in the ravings of her delirium. This was well, for the colonel would have found the sound heart to be listened to.

Tom Stevens, when the funeral was over, remained to acquaint the colonel of his plan, and the hopes that he had of capturing the assassin. But the old planter, though he heard it all with the same interest as before, seemed deprived of a sudden of the energy and determination which had been his at the first. He had no longer a resolve to lead the chase. He expressed no intention of going on the trail. The subject of offering a large reward, which the local authorities would undoubtedly do, for the capture of Charles Adler, was alluded to by the sheriff, and Colonel Carbury caught at the suggestion, and instructed Stevens to announce his offer of five thousand dollars for him, dead or alive. Others came, and he was not without his share of would-be comforters. The line of successors to the primitive three in the land of Uz seems likely to stretch, like Banquo's royal dynasty, "till crack of doom." He heard them in silence, and, strange to say, without even a show of impatience. His old-time spirit was too much crushed for even that.

It was different, however, when Phil Munroe, as the last of the neighboring planters and rancheros were taking their leave, again asserted his belief in the innocence of the accused.

Some one spoke of the fact that no one at Fair Oaks had seen Charles Adler since an early hour on the evening of the tragedy, and that the time and manner of his leaving home was evidently unknown to the negroes on his mother's plantation. This tallied with all that was already known and suspected.

"That ain't no doubt but what the younger he's levanted," said the ranchero; "but fer all o' that, hyer's one what'll b'lieve Charley Adler is a cowardly cut-throat when he hears him confess ter hit, an' not before!"

"What will you believe, then, Munroe?" asked the colonel, with a glimmer of the old excitement of manner returning.

"Jest what I sees with my own eyes, cur'n'l. Hit's dog-goned queer, I will say that much, but I knows the boy, and I stan's up fer hit that he's squar' an' white."

Colonel Carbury's pale face flushed with anger and disgust as he turned away. Phil would, apparently, make but few converts to his charitable opinions. It would be well enough, so everybody thought, to talk of giving young Adler the benefit of the doubt when any reasonable doubt should arise. Yet, like Galileo, the one friend of the absconding alleged murderer held to his belief, even in the face of persecution. He persisted that he knew Charley Adler, and that was enough for him.

That the colonel should bear this with impatience was not to be wondered at; but he had yet to listen to that which was still more unwelcome, and from where it was least expected.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FADE AMONG THE FLOWERS.

The crisis had passed with Cora Carbury, and she gradually came back to life, and to a realization of what that life must henceforth be.

Although in her latter delirious utterances, the name of her lover had ceased to be mentioned by her, the mind of the poor girl still dwelt upon the horrors of the last scene that had imprinted itself upon her brain. It seemed impossible for her, whether sleeping or waking, to put it from her. And every word, every illusion which she had made, went to sustain Dr. Maule's hypothesis of the murder.

"I saw him—I did!" Cora would exclaim, from time to time. "I saw his face, that wicked face, among the bushes, and the jessamine blooms around it. Oh! that evil eye," and the raving girl would shudder. "That evil eye among the sweet blossoms of jessamine!"

Over and over again would she cry out, in seeming affright, as she lived over in her frenzied imagination the dread tableau in which she had taken so prominent a part. But still no name was spoken.

"He turned and ran," she would say, "he ran like a dog through the shrubbery. He will escape!"

"Yes, my poor child," the old colonel would say, as he sat by the bedside of his suffering child, and held her unconscious hand; "he has escaped, but we will have the cowardly fiend yet. Your poor brother's dastardly murder will be avenged."

Strength came slowly back to Cora Car-

bury, and the day came when she had to be informed of the additional loss she had sustained. But, though she had loved her mother fondly, the sad news that she would look no more upon that mother's face in this world, seemed scarcely to agitate her. It was but one blow additional, and in the bruised condition of her spirit, it seemed insensible to suffering.

"Did he shoot all three?" she asked in a tone which held more of anxiety than any in which she had previously spoken.

"Your poor mother? Oh, no," was the reply of the colonel. "Her death was calm and peaceful, quiet as even her life had been."

"I mean—you know whom I mean, papa! was Charley—was Charley Adler killed?"

Colonel Carbury sprung up in great agitation.

"Killed? No, my poor child! Would that he had been! But he escaped, as you feared he would—the cowardly assassin of our boy James has escaped."

"I knew he would get away. I felt that he had done so; for no one but myself—not even Jamie—saw him. But I saw his face as he was on the point of firing, and I saw him as he stole away through the shrubbery. His eyes—oh, they were terrible, papa! but I recognized him though he looked so different, so fiendish!"

"To be sure, you did, my child; and we will capture the miscreant yet. Charles Adler shall atone for it with his life!"

"Charles? Oh, papa, he did not shoot! I know that he did not. I called to him, not to do so. James, I know, shot at him, but Charley—no, never! And that horrid face, those wicked eyes—and Jamie never knew it. He shot, poor Jamie did, at Charley! but he was not killed, as Jamie was! Oh, say he was not papa! Tell me that Charley is not dead!"

The girl's excitement was now so intense as to be alarming; and Dr. Maule, coming in at that moment, thought it best to administer a soporific, fearing a return of the fever.

"She has been telling you what she saw, has she not, colonel?" inquired the doctor.

"Yes, poor child, she insists that there was another, though she does not name him; and that he was concealed in the shrubbery. She says that my son did not see his murderer."

"Very likely. But Miss Cora saw and recognized him?"

"So she says, doctor; but she has not called his name."

"Not of late, I have noticed, but she did constantly in her delirium at the first."

"She still says," was the reply of Colonel Carbury, "that she saw young Adler, and called to him not to shoot; and she will have it that he did not do so. The other, the concealed assassin, she contends was the one who did the shooting. It is strange—passing strange."

"Not at all, colonel; it is very probable. Adler's confederate, as he must have been—"

"You think they were leagued together?" said the colonel, quickly.

"Not the least doubt of it," replied Dr. Maule.

"It must be so indeed," Colonel Carbury admitted. "From the first I was puzzled to make out how that effeminate villain had been equal to the deed by himself. But poor old Dan—who, think you, butchered the hostler?"

"Young Adler of course," was the answer. "The handkerchief, found under the negro's body, is proof conclusive on that point."

"It seems so," said the colonel; "but I could far more readily have believed the other assassin to have been the guilty one there. Charles Adler was always an especial pet with Uncle Dan, and there is no motive apparent in his case."

"There need not, necessarily, have been any," said the doctor. "Adler may have felt compelled to silence a probable witness; and, dark as it was in the stable, he very possibly did not recognize his old colored friend."

"True, very true; but this other? That is what we must first find out. Who can he have been?"

"Can your daughter not identify him?"

"She said distinctly just now that she knew him; but she suddenly became so agitated—"

"Yes, and no wonder. I am glad that I happened in when I did. She must not be disturbed now, colonel. When she is stronger, and her nerves in better condition, will be time enough to find out all that we would

know in addition to what is already known beyond peradventure—"

"You believe, Dr. Maule, that the murderers escaped in company?"

"We had but one trail, you know, and that led to the Adler plantation. Straight to the stables, where they went at once for their horses, and then first to the bayou, where the dogs lost the scent. I have little doubt that they left in company. Charles Adler was, I take it, hardly sufficiently up to the ways of the world, depraved at heart though he seems to have proved himself, to effect such an escape by himself."

"So I too would have supposed. But do you credit the universal tale among the Adler negroes, that none of them saw their young master on his return?"

"I doubt very much if any of them did so. The hour was one at which they would very likely be all sleeping, and the trail did not lead to the house, but only to the stables. No, I don't imagine that any of the slaves saw them. Had they done so they could never keep it to themselves. The distinction of being the last one who had seen and spoken to "Marse Charley" would be too much for their discretion."

It was some time before Colonel Carbury was able to renew the conversation with his daughter, which her nervous excitement had interrupted; and, when he did so, he could glean nothing that was satisfactory. She continued to be very weak in body, and evinced no anxiety on any subject but the escape of her lover. This, as may be readily believed, was anything but pleasing to her father. Seeing that all were averse to speaking of Charles Adler, she at once grew very reticent on the subject of the mysterious individual in the shrubbery.

"Why should I speak of him?" she would cry out. "You think that Charley killed poor Jamie, and that I have imagined there was another. It is wrong, it is wicked, and I will not talk of it any more! Charley never shot at my brother."

It was not wise or expedient, so every one felt, to trouble the poor girl more than was absolutely necessary until her convalescence was more fully established. So Cora was permitted to meditate on the bitter past, and to build, in her weakness, what air-castles she might for the future.

As for the colonel, a sense of failure had the effect of imbittering his mood against every one. He would have felt relieved could he in some way have punished his daughter for clinging, as she did so persistently, to her affirmation of Charles Adler's innocence.

At his best estate Colonel Carbury had been a man of evil temper, whom it was not safe to thwart, and positively dangerous to arouse. He had grown meeker since the crushing weight had fallen upon his heart, and he felt besides the necessity that there was in the present case, for self repression. When his daughter would answer his appeals for more light upon the mystery of the magnolia shades, by demanding to know if Charles were safe, or by declaring most positively that he had never shot her brother, the anguished father, in his suppressed rage, would stay to bear no more. With a bitter though silent curse upon his lips he would dart from Cora's room, stride madly down the stairs and out into the now neglected garden, kicking savagely at dog or young negro that might chance to be in his way.

The house-servants who might be lingering about the halls at such times, would scamper away at the sound of his steps, for they well knew that his wrath would fall like a sledge-hammer on any unlucky creature who might happen to cross his path.

He would go out and wander bare-headed through the gardens and the grove of magnolias until the dews of night were clinging about his clothes and his long white hair, and then, when the fierce tumult within him was somewhat subdued, he would return to the house. His face, pallid as death, and now seamed with deeper lines than of old, would frighten, on such occasions, even old Aunt Huldy, who was ever ready to anticipate his wants, and was willing besides to throw her privileged old body into the breach in order to set a good example to her fellow servants.

But the time came when Cora was able to leave her couch and manifest a more lively interest in what was passing around her. She was far from falling into a listless way, as one would be apt to imagine one so delicate and of such a temperament to do; on the contrary,

she seemed to have left her volatile girlhood behind her, and to have become equal at once to the sad situation which was hers.

More than this, she evinced a desire to grow strong and well immediately, and took the greatest care and precaution in that direction. On one, and that the all-absorbing subject in the household at Magnolia Plantation, as well as through that entire section of the country, she was averse to holding conversation. No longer excitable, she nevertheless would put away from her all questionings in regard to what she had witnessed on the night of her brother's murder, with the same reply.

"When you tell me that you believe Charles Adler to be innocent, then I will tell you who I am certain and positive, is the guilty wretch; but not until then!"

"But, Cora," her father would plead, suppressing at the same time his anger at her obstinacy; "how are we ever to know for whom we are to hunt, for your poor brother's death must not remain unavenged?"

"Go after the man whom you believe to be the assassin," she would say; "and bring him back. I wish you would."

"You forget that there were two, my child!"

"I do not, papa; there was but one."

There was no shaking this constant assertion, and evident assurance of the young girl, and the colonel began to believe that the mind of his child was seriously affected. The time was near at hand when he would be confirmed in this sad belief.

The moon had not yet arisen, but the stars had begun to speck the misty sky, one quiet evening, when Cora, after a day spent entirely in her room, and occupied, as had been a great part of several previous ones, in a manner that was unknown even to her own maid, was standing by the window, looking thoughtfully in the direction of the Rio Brazos.

A light step was heard in the apartment behind her; and, turning, she saw Aunt Huldy, who handed her a much worn and soiled envelope, and at once withdrew.

It was long months before the fond old negress looked upon her young mistress again.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CHASE OF DEATH.

ACROSS the wide prairie beyond the Brazos, astride of a noble white steed, darting like an arrow from a bow, and disappearing over a rise in the undulating open, rode a young man in the well-known costume of a frontiersman. They formed the only object that broke the repose of the immense solitude, and were following a trail that wound across the prairie, and disappeared amid a range of hills which arose in fantastic shapes toward the south-west.

The face of the horseman, all bronzed though it was from exposure to the sun's rays, and with a long silky brown beard completely concealing its lower features, was nevertheless one to be remembered.

His eyes were a marvel of beauty, his forehead was broad and intellectual, and a wealth of dark wavy hair clustered around his shapely head and fell upon his neck that was like a column of bronze. Tall, well-formed and handsome, he was, with a physique of iron and a visage that would have commanded admiration even among a gathering of notabilities, he was, one would have said at a glance, out of place in that wild scene on a Texan prairie, clad in a buckskin suit, wearing a broad black sombrero, and armed like a desperado.

With his eyes fastened on the trail ahead of him, he urged his horse onward, although the noble animal was beginning to show signs of fatigue, and had evidently been ridden far and furiously.

"I don't know why I should be in such haste," he said to himself, "for the day is young, and I can easily reach the motte where I intend to camp by sunset. But somehow I can't get the idea of danger out of this shallow pate of mine. Pshaw! I am growing superstitious. There isn't an Apache within fifty miles of me."

Though in a land where at that time the Indian's war-whoop was more frequently heard than the crack of a teamster's whip, yet the scout knew thoroughly well whereof he spoke. No one was better acquainted than he with any hostile body in their movements from the Brazos to the Rio Grande.

For days past he had been conducting, under

his sole guidance, a considerable wagon-train, made up of men with their wives and little ones and other belongings, slowly marching to their distant homes far to the south-westward. They had passed through the land of the red-skin and the equally dreaded white road-agent; but their guide knew every possible impediment in the way of their progress, and how to avoid them. He was now, instead of returning to the place whence he had set out a week before, on his way to join a couple of old pards whom he knew to be camped at the present time on the Medina, and with whom he had for some time been projecting a visit to the Alamo City. An occasional look-in on the scenes of civilization would seem to be necessary to this young man's existence, for no pilgrim to a sacred shrine was ever more regular and methodical in his devotions than was our friend in his journeys to and brief sojourns in every town of importance in Western Texas. As he neither gambled nor drank, and had never been accused of a *penchant* for either American beauty or senorita, this "method in his madness" would seem to imply business; but of what character it might be, if such were indeed the case, even his pards were in ignorance.

After laughing, as we have just heard him, at his superstitious fears, he rode along more slowly, until the prairie became more rolling, and in the dim distance it merged into the foothills of a lofty ridge of wooded land. The motte for which he was riding was a little to the southward, and though not so distant as the range of hills which arose upon his right, was not yet visible.

As if forgetting the assurance he had given himself that no enemy was within a day's ride of him, the scout cast occasional glances behind him, and acted as if he had some cause of alarm which he could not define, and which he would not admit to himself could exist.

The afternoon, now drawing toward evening, was an unusually lovely one, even for Western Texas. The rays of the semi-tropical sun, though not obscured, for the sky was cloudless as an Italian landscape, were mellowed by the soft haze through which they fell, and which seemed to arise, a mystic rather than a misty exhalation, from the flower-bespangled prairie. The mild zephyrs from the distant gulf, swept unresisted along the broad expanse of low level country, with a wealth of new life and stimulus in every breath. Soon it rose, and began to blow steadily, stirring the long grass into billowy waves.

The horseman turned, as he had already done several times, and slackened the pace of his steed to a walk as he listened. That a sound had caught his ear, borne upon the rising breeze, was evident from the expression which his face suddenly assumed. An enemy! could it be, when he knew so well the movements of every hostile party on the frontiers? Yes, an enemy of whom he had often heard, but whom he had never yet encountered. One whose ways were past finding out; cruel as a Comanche, relentless in its pursuit as any Apache.

In the first real terror that had ever yet struck the brave heart of this pilot of the prairies, he named the name of the pursuing foe:

"The prairie is on fire!"

Scarcely had he spoken, striking his spurs deep into his steed as he did so, when he saw, through a narrow opening which divided the ridge of low hills, which he had left on his right, a towering column of flame and smoke, rushing like some huge, fiery serpent, before the wind and across the prairie. On he dashed wildly and desperately.

"The breeze is behind me, and it is still rising and blowing strong! I must ride for it!"

Yes, he must ride for it indeed—for life; for the little hope of life that remained, the one last chance that might be his.

The scout was calm amid it all, and kept his presence of mind, although the prospect of escape was slight; for, fast as his horse was, the roaring demon came faster. Another glance behind him showed that the fire had reached the prairie on this side of the ridge, and was now extending its flaming legions on either side, and was rapidly inclosing the vast plain in its burning embrace.

"On, Selim! On, old fellow!" he cried, but in a voice which was more affectionate than that with which he was wont to address the noble animal, forgetting himself almost in his concern for his nobly-struggling but already nearly exhausted horse. Knowing, however,

that in the speed of Selim was his only hope, he gave the noble beast rein, and he sprung forward as if fresh upon the trail. Encouraged by the wonderful strength, speed and endurance of his steed, the young man momentarily forgot his danger, until recalled to it by a louder roar and fiercer crackling than before, as the flames struck a richer growth of the dry grass.

As though bent on showing his master that he knew how much depended upon him, the superb animal bounded forward with increased speed; for, though he had felt no cruel lash upon him, he understood what was expected from him, and was doing his utmost.

Nearer and nearer came the fire, until its heat was actually growing painful, and with a glance into the prospect ahead of him, the scout gave himself up for lost. He was about, however, to urge Selim to one more desperate effort, when the horse suddenly halted, and then turned to the left. This, then, must be the end.

"Poor fellow! He has failed me after all!"

These words, in pity for the noble beast far more than for his own fate, fell from the young man's lips. He closed his eyes for an instant, and then gave what he believed to be a last look around him. Suddenly his firm, pale face lighted.

"Saved!" he cried out. "Here is a divide!"

Down the steep pathway into the deep ravine scrambled the steed, and crouching down while his rider dismounted and lay stretched by his side against the overhanging bank, man and horse waited for the fiery deluge."

It was not long in coming. Over their heads swept the sea of flame, roaring like myriads of infuriated fiends, and sending down into the divide a heat that was almost beyond both human and equine endurance. Happily for them it was for only a brief space. For a little while they crouched in the manner that has been described, and then the heat grew less intense; the flames had been broken on reaching the ravine, and then had gone away along their course, but more slowly, for the wind had suddenly lulled.

Presently man and beast stood up together, the latter panting, and the former with his face wearing the same sculptured expression it had borne when the last hope had left him. A moment more and this changed, as a look of fondness came into his eyes, as he began patting his horse, while his statuesque face seemed transformed into the mobile countenance of a child.

The noble steed had taxed his strength to the extreme limit, and now tottered on his feet when he attempted to pace the length of the divide. The prospect of reaching the motte, which had been the objective point of the scout, was now a doubtful one, for Selim could not be urged, in his present condition, to continue on the trial. It would be the refinement of cruelty, and an act of which his master was incapable, to think of such a thing. It would be base flattery to call the man unfeeling who would exact it.

Leaving the exhausted animal, the scout started off along the divide to reconnoiter as to the best point in the ravine for a bivouac. The air had a stillness as if it too had been worn out in a contest with the devouring element; and after the heated furnace which had now cooled, it seemed the most refreshing in its every breath that the young man had ever known. It was a weird picture, had there been any one at hand to draw it, that the scene presented. The last declining rays of the setting sun falling through the charred branches and snags overhead upon the bank, one old and blasted tree, now scorched to blackness, lying across from one steep side to the other, with a single jagged bough outstretched like a witch's wand, the panting white steed leaning against the side of the declivity, and his master, in the picturesque costume of the plains, peering ahead of him in the uncertain Rembrandt light, made up a picture which many a one would long to paint.

The scout scrutinized the ravine as far as his eye could distinguish any object, and then advanced a few paces.

As he did so, his glance rested on a companion piece to his own at the opposite end of the divide. A horse, black as ebony, stood trembling, as his own white steed was now doing; and a man, younger than himself, and similarly attired, was looking down the length of the ravine in which he too had taken shelter.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THROUGH FEAR OF HER.

THE missive which old Aunt Huldy brought to Cora that evening in her chamber, and which, the reader will have already divined, was that which had been written so hurriedly by Charles Adler, on that fearful night, in the library at Fair Oaks, served to confirm the faith—had any such confirmation been required—of the maiden in her lover. All these long, anxious days, poor faithful little Pomp had treasured the epistle which his young master had enjoined upon him to deliver secretly. It had become greatly the worse for wear, but the little negro's chances of meeting Aunt Huldy were not very frequent. Pomp, however, haunted the banks of the bayou, like a weird little specter from its depths, and at length his patience and fidelity were rewarded. Though ignorant as to its contents, and never suspecting from whom it came, for Pomp was discretion itself, Aunt Huldy did not hesitate to bear the not very attractive *billet* to her mistress.

Cora Carbury read it, and her resolve was fixed. Had Charles written differently, had his communication been an acknowledgment of guilt—though that was impossible—the young girl would have hesitated about the course she had made up her mind to pursue, or perhaps would have abandoned it altogether.

But he had written, and in the very way—the only way indeed—in which she knew it could be possible for him to write. And she might have known that he never would have left without a word for her.

"I AM leaving," he wrote; "leaving home and you, forever! Well, too well I know what you will think of me, and what the memory of me must be in your heart. But, believe it or not—and I know you will not believe me though I swore it—I am innocent. But I may not ask you to distrust the evidence of your own senses. You saw your poor brother and myself in apparently deadly conflict. Cora, you know poor James and me, and you will believe this much; I was forced into it. You saw, and called to me to spare him. It was unnecessary. I had made up my mind to die by his hand. I am wounded as it is, though but slightly; my own pistol I shot in the air. I saw James fall, and you also, and I waited long enough to see that your wound was not a fatal one, and then, hearing the coming foot-steps of those whom the shots had alarmed, I fled, knowing how strongly the appearances were against me. Cora, I am fleeing from you and the testimony which I know you will give. I cannot bear the thought of your condemnation. You will hate me; it cannot be otherwise. I must live under the thought of it, for I have something still to live for. I do not say that I know who is your brother's murderer, but I go to find him. Though James Carbury sought my life, he shall be avenged through me. You will live, I pray, to see this and to regret the hasty judgment which I must not blame you for passing upon me. I am not running away like a coward, but I cannot die until my name and reputation are unstained before the world.

"Farewell, Cora; I will not tell you what you have been and must ever be to me.

"CHARLES C. ADLER."

Cora Carbury read this letter, and sat down, her face unchanged, to meditate upon its contents.

It was a strangely attractive face at all times, and now, with the new-born light of some firm resolve stamped upon it, there was a beauty and an attraction in it which it had never before worn. Pure, and delicate, and sweet, and youthful, wonderfully lovely and seraphic in its expression; not bright and vivid, and glowing and enchanting, like those faces which dazzle and infatuate men, warping their cooler judgments and winning them over to all kinds of rashness. It was one that could not fail to appeal to the higher nature of any man who had a spark of honor and chivalry in his composition. And now, with the air of determination which gave a queenly grace to what before was almost childish in its loveliness, she looked as though born to rule.

Charley had been right to go as he did. Very well did Cora know that. Even now, in spite of her assertions to the contrary, every one believed him to be the assassin; and had he remained, when, as they told her, she kept calling upon him in her delirium and evidently identifying him as her brother's murderer, his life would surely have fallen a sacrifice, as her father's anger could have been appeased in no way short of this. There had been clearly nothing else for him but flight. But the thought that it was her judgment of him that he had feared; that he had gone away believing that she could condemn him, was the bitterest thought of all.

"I would have believed in Charley Adler," she said, calmly and tearlessly; "I would have believed in him, even if I had not seen—"

Then she shuddered, as though the last object that had fallen upon her glazing eyes as she fainted in the garden, was ever before them.

It was almost midnight before the maiden aroused herself from the state of inaction, almost of stupor, into which she had fallen after reading the message from the fugitive. This could not go on. She must be up and doing. A new day would dawn presently, and that day must find her—where? From her window, as she gazed out, she could see the twinkling stars reflected in the depths of the wide Gulf in the distance, could hear the sad lapping of its waves upon the sandy beach, and catch the glowing phosphorescent flashes which came from them. There was no moon, but the sky was brightly blue, and a few fleecy clouds hovered here and there. It was strange that the suffering girl could thus stand and drink in the calm beauty of the scene; but all her terror, and misery, and anxiety seemed far removed from her, or else swallowed up in the contemplation of what was before her.

Standing thus alone—alone indeed, in every sense—Cora dreamed of a triumph that might be hers. They had refused to listen to her when she told them the truth, as she knew it. They had behaved as though they thought her words were still spoken in her delirium. She could no longer endure this. It would drive her mad. She remembered having heard her dead mother say, that the right always triumphed in the end. And was not Charles Adler right? He was, and some day the world, this short-sighted censorious world, would acknowledge it.

Evil, too, she had heard, never prospered long. Her poor brother—it was sad to think of, now that he was no more, but she had known it only too well—had been wild and reckless, and see what a fate had overtaken him!

Retribution, sooner or later, must come upon the wrong-doer, and if James's end had been such a fearful one, surely that of his cowardly slayer could not be less so.

It must be, and her eyes would look upon it, as they had been witnesses of the crime. She could never forget the face with its evil eyes that haunted her. It ever confronted her, and eclipsed the one vision that, before she had beheld it, was always before her. It clouded and obscured, in its hideous ugliness, the face which was so frank, and true and honest. And he had been made the scapegoat. He, so generous, and chivalrous, and noble! Who had there ever been who could equal him? No false or mean word had ever stained his lips—no selfish thought had ever come near to him.

The young girl thought of that last walk with her lover in the garden, of the fond vows that had been breathed, and the brief space that had been hers to linger upon them. It was all so long ago; so much had happened since then, that she felt as though she had grown old. Or, had it been a dream, and was this the awaking?

She had parted from him that night, and gone away willingly at the last, for she wished to be alone. She wanted to sit down, and try to realize the great happiness that had now come to her—to shut her eyes, and hear again the words and see the glances that made her music and her sunshine. She had gone, not into the house, but to a seat in the front garden, near the end of the veranda; the pleasant moonlit garden, where the roses and jasmines perfumed the air. Such a solemn and still night as it was! The pale stars gleamed in the tropic sky, the moonbeams gave a silvery radiance to the water and the trees, the flowers were sleeping; the roses alone seemed to be awake, and to greet her as their queen. Far off, like the sweet faint echo of music in a dream, she could hear the sighing of the sea. She was alone, though it had been for a brief minute only—alone with the beauty of the summer night, and her "love's young dream."

Then the angry altercations, the voices which she knew so well, awakened her from her blissful musings, and she had gone back—gone back to misery, and horror and grief!

But not to these entirely; for had not Charley loved her? Yes, and she loved him; and neither present anguish nor future horrors could ever efface that. She believed, because she knew, that it was

"Better to have loved and lost,
Than never to have loved at all."

Colonel Carbury had been in no enviable frame of mind, even after his accumulated

griefs had begun to subside from their first violence. He had told himself that he could live only for vengeance, but he seemed forced to inaction, and no trace whatever had yet been found of the assassin. The mystery of the second party, the confederate of young Adler, for that there had been two concerned in it, there was no longer any doubt—was as far from being solved as ever.

Who could this man have been? And what could have been the nature of his difficulty, if any, with James Carbury? Or had he been merely a paid assassin, the vile mercenary hireling of Charles Adler? These were the questions which remained unanswered.

That the colonel's daughter could reveal more in regard to the man than she had yet done, was certain. But Cora had been very retiring for the past two or three days, and her father had not thought it expedient to worry her, for the present, with questionings.

He would wait no longer, however. That, he was quite determined upon. The girl might adhere, if it so pleased her, to her insane belief in young Adler's innocence, but she must give the name—for she apparently knew it—of his companion in crime.

With his mind thus made up to demand from Cora, what he felt he had been unnecessarily postponing, he sought her apartment, on the morning following the receipt by her of Charley Adler's letter.

She was not there, neither had her bed been occupied the previous night.

CHAPTER XIX.

A FELLOW FEELING.

"My name is Leighton—Graeme Leighton," said the scout, advancing and saluting in a friendly way the man who, like himself, had taken refuge from the wrath of the Fire King in the ravine.

"And mine is Clarke," was the reply, as the stranger took the proffered hand of his new acquaintance. "You are, I presume, the scout who is so well known on the border as Gallant Graeme?"

"A great many call me so, I believe," was the reply. "That was a tight run we had of it—a mighty close one, was it not?"

"Not so much for me, I am thankful to say," answered the young man who had given his name as Clarke; "I chanced, luckily for me, to be within a few hundred yards of the divide at the further end, when I detected the trouble, and did the best, and indeed the only thing that was possible under the circumstances. So you came near being singed, did you?"

"The nearest in the world," said Gallant Graeme. "I thought at one time that it was all up with me, but my noble horse scented out the place of safety which I never would have seen or thought. The poor animal, however, is completely done up, and I was just prospecting with a view of camping here for the night. And you, pard?"

"To tell the truth, I scarcely know. My horse, like your own, is pretty well used up. I must halt where I am, I fancy."

"You can't do better," said Leighton. "I had in view for the night a motte some distance to the west of us, and which I could easily have reached but for this mishap. No chance of that now, though, so we may as well conclude to bivouac where we are."

"I should be glad of company in any event," said Clarke, "and am more than glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Leighton."

"Oh, sink the mister!" was the retort. "Call me Leighton, or Graeme, if you will. I am more accustomed to the latter."

"Thanks!" said the other, delighted with the free-and-easy manner of the scout of whom he had heard often, and always most favorably; "and if you should find Charley a more convenient mode of addressing yours truly, I should be equally well pleased."

"All right, Charley! It's ever so much, as we are doomed to be pards for the present, under difficulties. Now, suppose we proceed to go into camp."

A few minutes more and the two newly-made acquaintances were quietly discussing an impromptu supper, their horses being near them, and feeding upon the long fresh grass in the shady ravine, which had escaped the touch of the flames.

"Which way from here, pard, are you making on this lone scout?" asked Graeme.

"Oh, westward," was the somewhat careless reply of Clarke.

"Westward, ho! eh?" said the other with a laugh. "Then you are on no particular trail?"

"Nothing very definite," said his companion, and the sad tone in which it was spoken all at once seemed to touch the scout.

"I'm never inquisitive, Charley," he said; "but it just strikes me, perhaps you wouldn't object to pull in the same boat with me for a few days. You might strike a trail for yourself; or, who knows, we might strike one in common."

"I thank you very much," said Clark; "I shall be only too glad to accept your very kind offer."

"Oh, cheese that, pard! I know a white man when I see him; and if you are a little new to the prairies, I may be able to put you up to a thing or two."

"Which way does your trail lead from here?"

"To the Medina," replied Graeme. "Two of my pards are camped there awaiting me, and after a hunt together which we have been contemplating for some time, we expect to take a little run up to San Antonio. How would that suit you?"

"I don't know," said Clark, with some reluctance in his speech and manner.

"Oh, if you think it mightn't suit my pards, there is just where you are out, my boy. I know what suits Gus and Frank as well as they do themselves."

"I was thinking of San Antonio," the young man answered.

"Oh, you were thinking of going there? That is lucky. We'll chime in all serene, I see."

It was exactly what Clarke had been thinking of not doing, nevertheless he allowed his hospitable companion to go on without interruption.

"You see, Charley, I take a scout in that direction at certain times, and this happens to be one of them, when I am looking out to settle up some business that has been on my hands for some time. San Antonio has its busy seasons when my customer is apt to turn up there, and I should hate to miss him; which has happened already once or twice. Business, you know, is business."

"What class of people generally congregate in the Alamo City at such times?" inquired Clarke. "Rancheros, vaqueros, and all that sort of people, I suppose?"

"Just so: and gamblers and roughs, with a sprinkling of humans of our own genus."

"And, may I ask with which of these classes, you expect to transact business?"

"Oh, I am likely enough to pick up a little in my line with all of them," was the careless answer; "but my specialty happens to be with the gambling fraternity when I get within the precincts of the Bull's Head—at least with one of those gentry."

"I should take but little interest in that," said Clark. "I never play for money."

"Nor I," said the scout, "unless, as in the case under consideration, there are very special reasons for it."

"And the town is a great resort for that class a little later, you tell me?"

"Oh, it's the Mecca of the tribe," replied Graeme. "They are all bound to fetch up there some time or other in their lives; so I never trouble myself about eking the trail of my customer. I visit the places which I know he cannot very well keep away from at certain seasons, and if I miss him a few times, I am certain to hit him at last. I take it easy, as you see, but I am none the less determined."

"I think I should like to visit San Antonio," said Clarke, after a pause.

"We can make the trip together," was the response; "but in the mean time, you had better make up your mind, if you have no other trail in view, to come up on the Medina with me, and join my pards until time for migrating."

"I will do so, and thank you too."

"Good for you! Frank and Gus are rough diamonds, but they are the real gems for all that; and if you have chosen a frontier life, they can put you up to some tricks in border-craft that you could only learn in the school of experience, and be a long time in graduating at that."

"I am in for just that sort of life," said Clarke, rather bitterly; "but I may just as well say here, that it is not from choice."

"I reckon not," said the other. "Few youngsters of your cut go deliberately into that sort of thing. I can't say that I did my

self. I had an object, which I have been long in accomplishing, but meanwhile the life has proved a very fascinating one for me, and I question very much if I ever relinquish it. At least it has made me patient, and I needed to acquire the virtue, for those famous mills of the deities have been grinding more slowly, I think, than even they have the reputation of doing."

"I know not if I could learn patience," was the half-soliloquy of his companion.

"Not in the school of adversity perhaps; but in the glorious excitement of a life on the boundless Texan prairies, you feel not the flight of time, and the day for which you wait never seems far distant."

"So mote it be!" was the young man's reply.

"It will come," said Graeme; "I have made up my mind to it, and I can wait for it."

"Leighton," said the other, "I will be frank with you—I feel that I can, and that I ought to do so. I am here, because my home, to the east of us—but never mind where—is, and can be my home no longer. But I have not fled from justice, but from injustice. I am a fugitive, not so much to save my life, as to save, as much as I can, pain and misery to another. And by thus flying, I am not without the hope that I may some day be able to clear my reputation of the stain that rests upon it. I live for that from henceforth, and for revenge."

"You would not blame me, my friend, if you knew all. Plunged in a moment, as it were, from the very summit of earthly bliss, to the lowest depths of human misery, and a like fate forced upon one who is far dearer to me than life, all my once rooted and grounded principles, which forbade the feeling, have vanished before the voice that is ever crying within me for vengeance."

"You speak of one whom you loved, pard; does she still live?"

"Yes, I trust so!"

"And not disgraced and dishonored?"

"Oh, no! Thank God, no!"

"Clarke," said the scout, "had you ever a sister of your own?"

"Never; I am an only child."

"Then it is not for you to cherish dreams of vengeance. Your wrongs, great though they may have been, are trifling."

"You know nothing of them," said the young man, indignantly, "or you would never think of calling them so!"

"Softly," said Leighton; "I mean that they are trivial in comparison. Let me tell you of injuries which will make your own seem so light that, perchance, you may feel better able to bear them. A sister, young, beautiful and good, lured from a happy and peaceful home by a handsome and fascinating demon in human shape under a promise of marriage—a secret marriage, to which she blindly consented, but a mock one performed; a few months of a fool's paradise, and then discarded, when about to become a mother, with the devilish fact thrown in her face that she had never been a wife. Bad enough, you will say; fiendish enough in all conscience."

"But listen; I have not finished. There is worse yet to come. The poor, trusting and betrayed victim follows her betrayer to make a last touching appeal for mercy for herself and her unborn babe. She feared to return, dishonored as she was, to her once happy girlhood's home. Learning that the man whom she had called husband had taken passage on a certain steamboat, she succeeded, at the last moment, in getting on board also. The poor girl would not make herself known to the villain in public, so much regard had she for the feelings of the vile coward, but waited until late at night and joined him when he was alone on the hurricane-deck. Here she made her heart-broken prayer for mercy, and here she met her fate. He murdered her and threw her body overboard!"

Graeme Leighton rose to his feet as he said this and paced nervously backward and forward for some minutes. Then, seating himself, he continued:

"There was a witness, though the dastard had not suspected it, and he was secured. He contrived, however, to make his escape in the darkness at the next landing, and still walks the earth. Now you know why I visit the Alamo City."

"Yours are wrongs, indeed!" said Clarke. "Henceforth I am with you in every thing, and more especially on the trail of the cowardly betrayer and assassin."

"Shake!" was the sole response of the scout; and in five minutes more both were sleeping soundly.

CHAPTER XX.

THE BOY SCOUT.

OVER the rise in the prairie appeared a white spot which gleamed in the light of the declining sun like a speck of silver; then came in full view the wagon, the top of which alone had been first visible, and then another, and still another, until, like a fleet of vessels on the broad ocean's surface, the prairie schooners, twenty and more in number, launched themselves upon the green bosom of the plain. Like a long white serpent the train went on its winding way toward the land of the setting sun, the land of wild beasts and wilder red-men, and in the depths of whose vales and hills lay untold wealth for the daring and adventurous, who could turn their backs upon civilization and brave the perils of a trackless wilderness.

Across the rise they came, wagons, ambulance, horsemen, horsewomen, riding along at their leisure, and a small herd of domestic animals, with a few extra teams bringing up the rear.

It was the same train that Gallant Graeme had, but a day or two before, left in charge of a competent scout, his engagement having terminated at that time on account of his tryst with his pards on the Medina. That morning, however, upon breaking camp for the day's march, the scout had gone off by himself, promising to join them in the afternoon, and find them a good place for encampment; but the shadows of sunset were now near at hand, and as he still delayed his coming, more than one face in the company began to wear an anxious look.

The anxiety becoming general, and the night now fast approaching, a horseman separated himself from his companions and galloped to the front, calling out to the driver of the ambulance as he did so:

"Jeff, head for that stream, and we will camp there. That mottle which we see in the distance is fully half a dozen miles away."

"Yes, marse," was the reply of the negro driver; and the man who had given the order dropped back once more, this time addressing one of the party who came up to him:

"It is the best thing we can do, and I think we are mighty fortunate in finding a stream where we can encamp; but I must say I am quite concerned about that scout's not having returned. He has never before been absent from the train more than an hour or two at a time, and he left us this morning before we broke camp."

"I feel considerable anxiety myself," was the reply; "but the man has the appearance of one who can take care of himself."

"Here he comes!" suddenly called out a young lady of the party, who, with several others of the younger set, was varying the monotony of the long trail by riding on horseback.

All eyes were at once directed toward the point which the maiden designated with her riding-whip; and, sure enough, about a mile distant a horseman was seen coming at a rapid gallop. All felt relieved, and down into the prairie valley and toward the stream the train wended its way.

In a few moments the horseman appeared over the rise of the plain behind them, and an exclamation of disappointment arose to every lip. The color of the horse which he rode had caused him to be taken for the scout, whom in no other way, as they could now perceive, did he resemble. It was a splendid animal, that upon which the new-comer was mounted, but he showed the effects of hard riding as he dashed up to the train.

The stranger doffed his sombrero at sight of the ladies, and asked quietly to see the captain. That gentleman at once turned his horse, and asked politely how he could serve him. The boyish face of the strange youth flushed as he saw the attention he attracted, but he calmly stood the ordeal.

He was a mere lad, apparently not more than eighteen, with a beardless face, mild blue eyes, and curling masses of pale golden hair which fell upon his shoulders.

He was well mounted upon a small but wiry animal, that evidently was possessed of both speed and endurance, and sat his saddle with an ease that showed he was perfectly at home there.

His attire was of buckskin, with the richest possible trappings, and a light broad-brimmed sombrero shaded his face. He was fully armed and equipped, and in spite of his handsome youthful face, and slender build, had the air of one who had will and determination, and who would dare anything that any other man would do.

In answer to the captain's question, he replied, in singularly soft and pleasant tones:

"I am bound west, and have been riding hard to overtake your train to ask the great privilege of joining you. I am still somewhat new to the prairies, and this is not the safest part of the world to attempt traveling in alone."

"You are more than welcome," was the courteous response of the captain, who could not help being pleased with the frank and open face of the boyish stranger. "By all means do so, and I will invite you to join my mess."

"I thank you very much. My name is Colt Carter. I have adopted this wild, roving life; but, as I said, I am rather a novice as yet."

"Well, Carter, my boy," said the captain, "it seems hardly the life for one of your age and appearance."

"It must suit me, whether or not," was the somewhat sad rejoinder. "I have no one to care what kind of life I lead, or to lament very deeply when death overtakes me."

There was such a tinge of bitterness in the youth's tone, that the captain was glad of the opportunity of changing the subject by calling out to the driver of the ambulance:

"I say, Jeff; here is our camping-ground, along the banks of this little stream."

So saying, he turned and ordered the teamsters into position for the night.

They had hardly more than gotten into camp when the missing scout came up, to the great relief of the entire party. That worthy individual had met with no adventures worth narrating, though he professed to have gone out in quest of them. It was not long before he observed the addition their company had met with in his absence, and he was not diffident in beginning at once to scrape acquaintance with the stranger.

The latter, having frankly given his name and the circumstances of his joining the wagon train, met with a most cordial welcome from this invaluable adjunct to the party.

"Put it thar, pard!" he said, as rising from his recumbent position, he held out a broad palm, which soon clasped in a tight gripe the slender one of the youth. "But, look a hyer, pard, ef hit's a fa'r question, what mought yer be a doin' out this-a-ways?"

"I have been on a lone scout," was the reply of Colt Carter, "and I joined the train for my own better protection and safety."

"Jes' so, I'm in ther scoutin' biz myself, an' when I gits this hyer lay-out ter ther destination, I is gwine in fer a reg'lar jim-jamboree. Not that I sprees er goes in fer keards more'n common, but when I strikes San Antone, I ginerly 'lows ter enj'y myself. Dead loads of old pards o' mine sartin' ter fetch up in ther ranch 'fore shortly, an' yer kin jist bet I'm on hand every time."

"You will go to San Antonio then, after you have guided this train to its destination?" inquired Carter.

"Soon es I strikes ther locate, I skutes fer ther Allymo," was the reply. "Ef yer would like ter jine in, hit would jest be in my line, fer I mos' allers an' oftener hez a pard in tow."

"I should like it very much, I think," said the youth. "I have been kindly invited to continue with the train, which just suits me for the present. After that—"

"Arter that, yer chips in wi' me. Thet air the long an' short o' ther discussion. Even bin ter San Antone ary time?"

"Yes; years ago, when I was quite a little boy," said Colt.

"How long, 'bout, hes yer bin a man?" asked the scout. "No 'fense, pard, but yer don't look so aged as ter be venerable."

"I may be older than you take me for," the youth answered, pleasantly. "At all events, I feel old enough."

"Dog-goned queer that," said the other; "I look, I reckon, nigh 'bout es old es ther perrers, an' not more'n half es fresh, but I feels es young es when I hed my fust pa'r o' butes."

Thus far into the night the two men, so different in appearance, in manners and in speech, conversed together.

The scout was naturally of a buoyant dispo-

sition—most men of his calling are so—and his temperament was almost contagious. Living with very little thought or care for aught but the trail on which he might happen to be for the time being, he enjoyed the present with a keenness and a zest which made the younger man begin to doubt if the anticipations of a good time in the Alamo City could much exceed it when they were realized.

Gradually Colt Carter's gloom began to disperse before the genial fire of the other's warmth and wit; and when he, at length, fell asleep, it was only after a soft, but ringing laughter, which was evidently not habitual, had been forced from him, and had sounded from one end to the other of the encampment.

He had resolved that he would continue with the wagon-train until they reached the goal of their wanderings. It seems so peaceful, and without care, among them—so the youth thought—a haven of repose from the storms of life, and he felt that he could lay his tired head upon the soft, cool grass, and sleep forever.

He resolved too, that he would, when the end of this trail was reached, accompany the old scout to San Antonio.

CHAPTER XXI. THE TWO HOMES.

LAFAYETTE CARBURY, alone in his princely home at Magnolia Plantation; Adelaide Adler, alone in hers at Fair Oaks.

It might safely be said, perhaps, that no more truly wretched people, in the same state and condition in life, were anywhere to be met with.

Mrs. Adler's indomitable pride kept her from exhibiting any of those inward feelings, which, in her case, must indeed have been beyond the power of expression; but pride, will, nerve, and even the thirst for revenge seemed suddenly to have forsaken the once haughty and high-spirited Colonel Carbury.

The disappearance of Cora, startling though it was, did not after all so much surprise those who had known of her attack of brain fever following the wound that she had received, and of her subsequent hallucination in insisting upon the innocence of Charles Adler, as well as her persistence in fixing the crime upon the mysterious concealed assassin, whom nevertheless she was so reluctant to name.

In the opinion of all such, the poor girl's mind was seriously impaired, and they did not hesitate to attribute her flight to insanity, and to explore the depths of the bayou at all points for her body.

It was well known by the colonel that this was the view which was generally taken; but whether he shared in it or not, it was impossible for any one to say. He had, it was true, some show of encouraging the belief, but strange to say, he took but little apparent interest in the search that was being made for her. But the old planter was far from concurring in this general view of it, and if he seemed to passively fall into it, the reason was that his own surmises were more painful still. One secret the stricken old man kept to himself, which if known, even among the slaves on the plantation, would have at once disposed of the theory of suicide in connection with the missing Cora Carbury.

This was the absence of Electra, the fleetest horse in the colonel's stable, and which his daughter had been in the frequent habit of riding, previous to the tragedy at the Magnolias. There having been no regular hostler since poor Ben's murder, and the attention given to the stables by one impromptu groom after another, being of the most desultory character, no attention had been called to the vacant stall.

Had it been, the colonel was prepared to account for Electra's disappearance in a way of his own, for he was far from wishing to turn the current of public opinion in regard to his daughter's fate.

And this was because his own firm conviction was to him a far more unwelcome one. Because he would a thousand times more willingly have held the popular theory of the sad affair than the one which had become fully fixed in his mind. He only hoped and prayed that they might continue in their belief, and that nothing would ever transpire to shake it.

Colonel Carbury believed in his soul that Cora had fled to join Charles Adler, the cowardly assassin of her brother.

Aunt Huldy, when the flight of her young mistress was discovered, had hastened to inform the colonel of the note which had been

delivered to her on the previous evening; and which, she thought might furnish a clew to this new and strange turn of affairs.

In the opinion of the stricken father, it accounted at once for the mystery. The missive had been brought to Magnolia plantation by a little negro boy from Fair Oaks—a boy who had been known as the favorite personal attendant of young Adler. Colonel Carbury would not seek for further information from any of the Adler household. The officers of the law had already done so, without obtaining any. It was plain enough, he thought, that Charles still had communication with his old home, but, with the crushing belief that had now come to him, he no longer cared to hear of his capture. If it ever should be, it must inevitably reveal only further shame and degradation. His daughter was now no less dead to him than his wife and son, and he determined, as far as it lay with him to do so, to "Let the dead Past bury its dead."

The loss of his last remaining child, and his own terrible surmises in regard to her fate, affected the old planter but little, for his crushed and broken heart and spirit were no longer sensible to the heavy blows that his adverse fortune might have still in store for him. His boy, the pride and glory of his life, and the hope of his house, to whose faults he had been blind—nay, had rather encouraged them, as the not unbecoming habits of a young man of his position and prospects—lay in his grave, the victim of a senseless family feud, or worse perhaps, of a low personal broil, at a time when it had been shown he was intoxicated.

But that was not the worst. The dreadful truth had been forced upon the stricken father that, had his son lived, he would now be either a convicted felon, or fleeing from the outraged justice and majesty of the law.

A forger! James Carbury, the last male representative, after his own brief day had ended, of the proudest family in that part of the State—the companion of a thief and desperado, and resorting at last to a low crime the better to carry out the reckless business of mad gambling to which he had completely given himself up!

Could the father of such a youth regret either his death, or the manner of it? Could he wish to call him back with the full consciousness of what life would henceforth be to him? Surely, were it not for the "deep damnation of his taking off," it would have been no more than natural and right that the fond and indulgent parent should be thankful that the boy now lay by the side of his sainted mother, in the cool shade of the magnolias, and that his faults and offenses were buried with him.

For Colonel Carbury, the moment that he discovered what James had done, nerved himself to the task of quieting all who might have been disposed to bruit the boy's shame abroad; and had set himself at once to the duty of paying every one of the forged bills which his unhappy son had drawn, although it promised to leave his broad estates in a condition little short of being as crippled as those of his old enemy, Kenton Adler.

After this, the wretched old man might well feel that there was nothing else left for him, but to turn his face to the wall and die. But while he did live, and he cared nothing now that the time must be short, he would protect, as best he might, the reputation of the lost Cora, the "sole daughter of his house and heart." The Adlers had achieved the last triumph. Kenton Adler, whom he had refused to see and be reconciled to when he lay dying, had beaten him, even in his grave.

And so the shadows gathered and fell about the memory of the fair girl, who had been the light of the Magnolias—the maiden who would have had, even with the losses which it had sustained, such a fair inheritance, had she only been permitted to remain and enter into possession of it. But when the low winds from the Mexique Gulf sighed through the long corridors, and made mournful music under the low eaves, the house servants would huddle together, as the evening shades came on, and fancy that they could hear again the merry, laughing voice which had once filled the old mansion with sweetness and song.

There was silence, the silence of the tomb, at Fair Oaks. For a tomb it was, the sepulchre of love and hope. Adelaide Adler had never ceased to mourn deeply and fondly for the husband of her youth, though the thoughts of

his love, and truth, and devotion, had become little more than a sad, but pleasant, memory.

But the new grief was one which must never manifest itself. Her son, whom she loved no less strongly, even though her affection was a selfish one, had gone from her gaze, she believed forever. She had faith in the innocence of Charles, for she had his word for that, and she well knew the value of that word, but none the less did she recognize the fact that every circumstance pointed to his guilt, and his fatal flight had confirmed it. No testimony, she felt convinced in her own mind, could ever be brought that would exonerate him, and popular opinion was so strongly against him, that only the most conclusive evidence in his favor could shake it. He had done right to leave, for she would not have had him perish on the scaffold, but it might be questioned if she could have lamented him more deeply if such had been his fate. Truly,

"There are words of deeper sorrow
Than the wail above the dead."

But her grief was not of the same character as that of Colonel Carbury, and was far easier to be borne. There was no actual disgrace in the calamity that had fallen upon her house. Possibly, in her wonderful pride and self-repression, she could have lived under it had it been so.

As it was, her household servants saw no change whatever in their mistress, and the name of their young master was never mentioned by her. The few from the neighboring plantations, who were on visiting terms at Fair Oaks, made their calls as formerly—not visits of sympathy and condolence; that, they dared not presume upon—and found Mrs. Adler the same cold, stately woman that she had been since the troubles with the Carburys had reached their culminating point.

She would not think—far less now than ever—of disposing of the plantation, as Charles had frequently suggested. Doubtless, and she knew it, an entire change of scene—to her old Kentucky home, perhaps—would have been more than acceptable to her, lonely and doubly-bereaved as she was. But that would have afforded occasion of triumph to her adversary, and sooner than permit such a thing, her proud heart might break in silence.

The generally received theory of Cora Carbury's disappearance she had received tacitly enough when it reached her, and had never thought of questioning. Indeed it seemed natural enough under the circumstances, and certainly far more plausible than the one which the colonel entertained, but of which, she, of course, knew nothing. The idea of Cora's having fled to join Charles never once occurred to her, for she did not dream that his penchant for the girl had ever gone the length of an open avowal of his love.

CHAPTER XXII.

A FEMALE VOLUNTEER.

UPON the banks of a small stream, and beneath the friendly shelter of a few scattering prairie trees, we left the wagon-train to which Colt Carter had attached himself, encamped.

The wagons, with their once snow-white covers, now stained brown with travel and exposure, were drawn up in the form of a crescent, with either end resting on the bank of the rivulet. Within the space thus inclosed a dozen or more bright camp-fires shed their ruddy light far across the wide prairie.

Herds of horses and cattle were staked beyond them, and were enjoying the rich and luxuriant verdure. The camp itself, for some time, was a scene of busy life, the principal duty in progress being the preparation of the evening meal.

These families, moving from the boundaries of civilization to the prairies of the far West, there to build for themselves new homes and fresh associations afar from the sunny haunts of their childhood, seemed strangely free from care and anxiety. Not a shade of sadness rested upon a single face, and but one of the entire party seemed to have a thought beyond the common anticipations of the company. Her we will now speak of.

One family among these daring pioneers we must introduce, although they have in themselves little to do with our narrative.

It consisted of five persons—Major Clay Kingsley, his wife, son and two daughters. The major himself was a hale, hearty gentleman of fifty-five, with a decidedly military bearing; his wife was a mild, delicate-looking matron, perhaps ten years his junior; the son,

a representative of the best class of Texan youths, was a young man of two or three-and-twenty, while his sisters, pretty and sprightly girls of sixteen and fourteen respectively, made up the family circle.

Not quite, however, for we must include a young lady, who for some three or four years past had been an inmate of the Kingsley household in the capacity of governess to Brunette and Blondine, the daughters of the house.

We have said a young lady. We should, in strict justice, correct the statement; for, though still young in years, Placide Houston was a widow. As such she had made herself known to Mrs. Kingsley at the old home on Corpus Christi Bay, when, homeless and friendless, having recently lost both husband and child, she had sought the position of governess to that lady's daughters.

She had come from Louisiana, her native State, to Galveston, seeking some such means of earning her livelihood, and from thence had been directed to the Kingsleys by a merchant in that city, of whom the major had been making inquiries with the view of securing an instructress for his children.

Her sad story, told without any attempt at pathos, her youth and pale patrician beauty, struck a chord at once in the chivalrous breast of Major Kingsley, and he would probably have engaged the services of the child-widow unhesitatingly, even though she had been found unfitted for the position.

But Mrs. Houston proved herself in every way qualified, and her home with the Kingsleys had been a pleasant and delightful one. She had been paid a liberal salary for her services, the great bulk of which, however, she had declined drawing until her engagement terminated. This was at the time of the breaking up of the old home preparatory to migrating for the West. It was far from being the wish of any member of the household that the beautiful governess, to whom they had all become fondly attached, should cease to be a member of their family. They had urged her accompanying them to their new home, and at the last moment Placide had decided to do so; not to remain with them, however, but only *en route* for some places in the Western part of the State which she seemed resolved to visit.

None of the major's family had been so anxious that the governess should remain with them—though he had been far less urgent than the others—as was Ralph Kingsley. Nor did he despair of seeing her change her determination even yet.

That Ralph had been for some time hopelessly—or, as he would perhaps have put it, hopefully—in love with Placide Houston, was evident to every one in the household, not excepting that lady herself. That it met with universal approval was just as apparent, but here the lady herself formed the exception.

Ralph Kingsley had never found the courage to declare his passion, for the simple reason that he had always met with the reverse of encouragement from its object.

What consoled him now at the thought that his first and only love was no longer to be with them, was the deliberate intention which he had formed of joining her at no distant day, when he firmly believed he would find it less difficult than now.

This, then, was the one face around the camp-fire that showed the trace of deep thought and a deliberate purpose. That Placide Houston was a woman with a history was evident to any close observer who could sit this evening and study the lines of thought, and suffering, and self-control that made her beauty seem fresh from a refiner's fire.

But a new day came to the pioneers, and saw them wending their way still further to the westward. Ere it was more than half over the young man, Colt Carter, who had attracted the favorable notice of Ralph Kingsley, and through him had been introduced to the other members of the family, was making rapid progress in his acquaintance with the young ladies, and especially with Mrs. Houston. Not that the generally too attentive Ralph was content to leave them to themselves, for even as it was he was a little nervous and restive at the pleasant way in which Carter and the beautiful widow seemed to drop into social converse. It was nothing new, and he well knew it; for Placide Houston, in however kindly a way she might regard Ralph Kingsley, was the furthest possible removed from any *cro'ck* sentiment. For that he might look

in vain. She could never be unconscious of aught else when in the society of the young man who adored her, for though she made no secret of the fact that she had great admiration for him, thought him very handsome and the best of company, she was equally as open in her evident resolution that he should never be more than that to her.

"So you leave us, when you do, Mr. Carter, to follow the fortunes of our worthy guide, philosopher and friend?"

"Yes; but only for a short time, I fancy," replied the youth.

"Then you have not decided," said the lady, "to continue a border life?"

"I think it quite probable," was his answer.

"And follow this calling, I presume?"

"I suppose so," said the young man, but with little animation in his tone; "that is, when I have become somewhat better acquainted with the country."

"Pardon me," said Mrs. Houston; "it seems a strange life for one like you."

"We cannot always choose our lives," was the quiet response.

"True"—and the lady's voice had a deep note of sadness—"I did not choose mine."

Ralph Kingsley here longed to interpolate, "But you may choose it now!"

The time and place, however, were clearly not propitious, and he checked himself.

Again addressing Colt Carter, Mrs. Houston inquired:

"Is it your intention to attach yourself to any party on leaving us?"

"I accompany Bristow, our scout," he answered.

"To be sure; I remember that you said so, but I thought it possible that he might be intending to act as guide for some other party, when he leaves us."

"Such is not his intention, madam," replied Colt. "He feels, I imagine, the need of a little rest and recreation."

"I should not wonder. And you, too—is that it? And for this you join him?"

"I have no time for that," was the reply. "I accompany Bristow because, as it happens, he is going where I am desirous of paying a visit myself—to San Antonio."

"Indeed! You have friends there, then?"

"No! Yes—that is, I may have. I hope so!" he said, hesitatingly.

"Happy are they who expect to find friends," said the lady. "For myself, I have no such anticipations." Then, in a lower tone, and as if speaking to herself, she said: "If I could but hope to meet an enemy!"

Low as the words were spoken, the quick and jealous ear of Ralph Kingsley had caught them, and his mind was at once made up. Placide Houston had an enemy; and, if so, she would need a friend.

"I will never lose sight of her," said the young man between his teeth; "I swear it!"

At this moment the scout came up, and addressing himself to Colt Carter, said:

"I hopes, pard, yer isn't gitin' so 'tached ter this hyer lay-out that yer won't feel like leavin' lit when we gits ter ther Frio, an' jinin' me on my nex' trail, es I bes bin a-reckonin' on. 'Tain't nat'r'l though, fer yer to be es tired o' this kind o' perigrinatin' es a pilgrim o' my years an' experiance."

"Oh, I'm with you, pard," said the other, with a laugh. "You can depend on me."

The scout turned away to join the captain of the train, and Mrs. Houston remarked:

"And I am with him too."

"You, madam?" exclaimed Colt.

"Certainly," said the lady. "You both go to San Antonio: so you have told me."

"Such is our intention," was the reply.

"And you will not refuse, I am sure, to give me your protection on the way?"

"Can you ask such a question? I am delighted for my part. We, both of us, will be only too happy to have the honor of doing so."

When Colt Carter joined Bristow, and acquainted him with the lady's expressed intention of accompanying them, that excellent citizen expressed his gratified feelings by saying:

"Dog'd ef I ever could make out what that was inter my make-up what tuck so strong with the weemen folks! Hit's allers ther same whar caliker air consarned. Hooray fer our side, I ses. Ther purty widder air a trump keard!"

Not equally elated was Ralph Kingsley, when he at length discovered the objective point of his inamorata on leaving them.

But inc'p'nt jealousy of the beardless youth,

who seemed to have become fascinated by her, soon gave place to the resolve he had formed when he heard that whisper of hers in regard to an enemy.

Might she not be about to meet him, whoever he was, in the Alamo City? And if so, he must follow and protect her.

CHAPTER XXII.

TRACING A LIKENESS.

THE rendezvous of Gallant Graeme and his pards, on the Rio Medina, had been reacl'd, and the hunt to which the former had looked forward to with such pleasant anticipations had been enjoyed to the full both by him and his new-made friend, Charley Clarke.

Like all other terrestrial things, however it had to come to an end; and leaving Frank and Harry to set out on a trail of their own, our gallant friend, accompanied by Clarke, took the trail for San Antonio.

The sun was yet some distance above the western horizon, when the two young men arrived at a *motte*, situated near the bank of a small stream—a spot well known on the frontier, for there, years before; a small outpost had been established, but which, like many another, met with a sad and speedy fate, for its occupants had been doomed to fall beneath the rifle and scalping knife of the Apache.

Cautiously the scout advanced into the timber, his eyes closely searching every nook and corner, and his nerves strung for action, should there be an enemy ambushed within. He soon satisfied himself on this point; he was preparing to stake his white steed that he might feed upon the luxuriant grass, his comrade being similarly occupied, and had removed the saddle, the better to rest the noble animal, when there came a sound of something crashing through the underwood. Uncertain whether to prepare for a deer, a buffalo, or an enemy, Graeme turned rapidly, and was about to replace his saddle, when a horse and rider dashed suddenly upon the scene.

On the instant, the eyes of the scout and the stranger met, and seemed to hold each other, as by some strange fascination; in the former, it was a gaze of startled and mystified surprise, in the latter there was a look that spoke an unmistakable fear.

At the first alarm, Gallant Graeme had seized his rifle, and stood ready on the defense, but he quickly lowered it when he perceived what was before him. It was a clean-limed and thoroughbred-looking chestnut pony, and mounted upon it—a young girl. So, at least, she appeared to the scout, though her pale, clear-cut face, and the haughty carriage of a patrician head might have belonged to one further advanced in years. Her hair was long, dark, silken, glossy and abundant, and hung in massive blue-black braids down her back. Her eyes were of the sleepy, Oriental type, with long drooping lashes, and her face purely Grecian in every outline. Her complexion was that of a brilliant brunette, rich and glowing in its dusky warmth, now bronzed to a deeper shade by the sun and wind.

Her closely-fitting riding habit was fashionable in its cut, sea-green in color, and ornamented with gilt buttons; on her hands she had gauntlet gloves of buckskin, while a sleigh hat of black felt encircled by a gold cord, and studded by a heavy black ostrich feather, was upon her head. Her chestnut steed was equipped with a side-saddle covered with buckskin and richly ornamented, a bridle of horse hair, and an immense silver bit.

Regaining his presence of mind in a moment, the scout instinctively raised his sombrero; but the beautiful woman, who had at first sight of a stranger drawn a silver-mounted pistol from her saddle pocket, at once returned it, and with a look of horror in her startled eyes, dashed past him, almost brushing against him as she swept by.

"Good heavens! I say, Charley!" called out Gallant Graeme to his companion; "did you see her? Of course you did; but did you observe her closely? I know we have met somewhere before; but where could it have been?"

"What on earth can she be doing here by herself on the prairie?" exclaimed Clarke.

"Oh, as to that, she probably belongs to some emigrant train; although I do not remember of any being expected in this direction at the present time. Who can she be? That is the question."

"Well, Graeme, that is something which you and I are not likely to discover, for this

evening at least. Yonder she goes, riding like mad across the prairie. Do you suppose she thought you an enemy?"

"Lord only knows! She looked startled enough, at all events. But I must know more about the mysterious maiden. Come, Charley, let us give chase!"

Bounding into their saddles, the two pards were soon flying in full pursuit across the prairie, but a few hundred yards behind the swift-paced steed of the flying fair one.

"Come, Selim!" urged the scout; "that limber-legged mustang shows you the track. I would not have believed that another animal on the frontier could do it. I say, Clarke, she is distancing us, old fellow."

Again both the men urged their horses onward, on seeing that the lady, after glancing behind her and finding herself pursued, had suddenly caused her pony to quicken his speed. It was soon evident that the game was up.

"You are doing your level best, Selim, old boy, but the chestnut is still creeping away from you. But, try, try again!"

With a look of disappointment at the now fast sinking sun, which seemed threatening the extinguishment of his hopes, Graeme applied the spurs once more to the noble beast, that, smarting with pain and rage at such unusual treatment from his master, bounded madly forward in the wild chase. Clarke followed in close pursuit, his coal-black steed being but little less swift than the milk-white animal ridden by the scout.

But useless their mightiest efforts; the chestnut of the fair unknown kept further and further in advance, until, after a race of an hour or more, Graeme reluctantly relinquished the attempt, to the no little gratification of his companion, and wheeling Selim to the right-about, once more beaded for the deserted *motte*, glancing back from time to time as he did so, and observing that the beautiful fugitive still kept up her rapid flight. Soon, however, the horse and its fair rider appeared a mere speck upon the prairie, and the scout's scrutiny had to cease.

Surprised at the apparition of such a being near the lonely *motte*, and wondering still more at her remarkable appearance and eccentric behavior, Gallant Graeme searched every covert and corner of the timber on foot, for some clew that might guide him in clearing up the mystery. He was obliged, however, to give up the task as fruitless, and betake himself to rest, following the example his pard had set him.

There was one reason, and a strong one—one of which Clarke had no suspicion—that accounted for the excitement of the scout, and his extreme anxiety to overtake and find out the name and character of this fair and mysterious vision.

Graeme Leighton felt that the face was one which he had seen in the past. It came before him suddenly, as a long-forgotten dream. And yet, so confused was he, that, familiar as it undoubtedly was to him, there was nothing by which could fix in his mind her identity. Darkness was now upon the prairie, and deeper darkness among the heavy shadows of the timber; but still the rare, pale, glorious face of the unknown, rose before his sleepless eyes through the long and silent watches of the night.

"Where can I have seen her before? For, that I have seen her, and not only that, but known her well somewhere in the past, I feel confident. It seems long ago—that is the strange part of it—yet whom could I have known in the old days, who would now be riding alone on a wild, Texan prairie? It cannot be that it is some picture that she reminds me of. No; for there was undoubtedly a mutual recognition. I saw it in the startled eyes of the woman, as if she knew me, and feared, above all things, that I would recognize her. It makes me almost hate myself for having given the poor thing a further fright, in getting up that mad chase."

In this way the scout meditated through the hours of darkness, until the moon arose from her cloud-covered couch on the horizon, and spread over the prairie a silvery luster which penetrated even the dense shades of the *motte*.

What connection could one, so certainly fresh from scenes of civilization and refinement—and among which Graeme Leighton must have known her, if he had known her at all—have with the wild scenes in which she had just formed so conspicuous a figure? What could she be doing here, in the solitude of majestic nature, where rarely a sound, save the bark of

the coyote, the crack of the rifle, or the war-whoop of the red-man broke the silence?

Over the past the memory of the puzzled young man roamed, through far different scenes in youth's bright morning where he felt he must have known this woman who so obviously shrank from meeting him. His thoughts ran back to a land somewhat nearer the rising sun; a cultivated clime, amid flowering and fragrant orange groves, and ripening fields of cotton and sugar-cane. They dwelt upon homes of comfort and luxury on the peaceful coast of fair Louisiana, and ran through festive halls where he fancied her voice must have rung, and her light foot tripped in the mazy dance. All in vain. Nowhere did she find a place amid them all. In no silent chamber of memory could he place her form.

The brief darkness had now fled, and the gray dawn was stealing in among the shadows, where lay the two men; the one, still sleeping, not quietly, but as if troubled by some recollection of past horrors—the other, in the same condition in which the darkness had found him, sleepless and perturbed.

Starting up, with a cry that awakened his comrade, he exclaimed:

"My God! Can it be possible? But no! The dead never return!" Graeme Leighton, to the uncertain vision of Clarke, had the appearance of one who had suddenly gone mad.

Then, a change, like a dissolving view in a panorama, passed over his face, as a new and nearer recollection arose before him.

"I am a fool, Charley," he said; "that woman was with the wagon-train which I had left only a day or two before I met you. They ought, some time ago, to have been safe on the Frio; and, what in the name of creation can she be doing here by herself? I never had a single square look at her, I remember, all the time that I was with them; so the poor thing must have been seeking, for some reason or another, to avoid me. It is strange; but her name, Mrs. Houston—she is a widow, I heard them say; Placide Houston—no; I must be mistaken. I never could have known her before."

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN UNKNOWN TERROR.

PLACIDE HOUSTON—for it was she indeed, now journeying under the protection of Bristol and the youth, Colt Carter, to the Alamo City—little dreamed, when she rode out unattended from the camping-ground where they had halted at an unusually early hour, of the adventure that was in store for her.

She had gone out, her wiry chestnut mare being still comparatively fresh, for a turn in a southerly direction on the prairie, with no other object in view than to be alone for a quite hour before sunset. She was on her way back to the camp when curiosity led her—most imprudently—to ride some little distance out of the direct trail, and take in the *motte*, which had so attractive an appearance as it rose like an island in the ocean on her way.

Without the slightest suspicion of any lurking danger, and humming a sweet, soft air to herself as she approached the timber, she was about to dismount and pluck some of the gorgeous-hued wild-flowers which grew in great abundance near the edge of the *motte*.

Startled at first glance by the sight of a horseman, who seemed to have just dismounted, she was quickly reassured when she discovered from his dress and appearance that there was nothing alarming in his probable character. She had instinctively drawn a pistol at first sight of the stranger, and was almost instantly returning it to her saddle-pocket when her pony brought them almost face to face.

Clearly Graeme Leighton was not mistaken when he decided that the apparition of himself had startled the fair equestrian, and that it was not fear of a stranger of the opposite sex in the abstract but of him—the man universally known on the frontier as Gallant Graeme—in the concrete.

It would not have been flattering to his self-esteem, had he not been at the first satisfied that the lady was some one whom he had known, and who might have some good reason for wishing to preserve an *incognita*. We have seen that his long and weary cogitations ended in his fixing her as the companion of the Kingsleys, for whom he had a little time previous been acting as guide, and who then,

be now recollected, had seemed rather desirous of avoiding him.

Back to the camp like the wind rode Placide, regaining her presence of mind and habitual composure when she perceived that she was no longer pursued.

She partook of the really tempting supper which the scout had prepared in her absence, and which had for some time been awaiting her, the two men being much too polite to set about satisfying their hunger until she returned. Soon, however, all was quiet, and, having kept silent regarding her adventure in the *motte*, Placide was now at liberty to dwell upon it, and its probable consequences.

Although she had ridden so many miles that day she had no desire for rest. A vague dread of some coming evil brought an excited restlessness which made her keep vigil while all nature seemed sleeping around her. All through the hours of darkness those two human beings, but a few miles from each other, and in some mysterious way related to each other, lay awake with their wonderings and their fears.

But there was this difference: While the scout was still unable to identify Placide with any one whom he had known in other days, it was obvious that he was known to her.

"To have met him again, and in such a way!" she exclaimed, in her evident distress of mind. "That, too, when for weeks I had been congratulating myself that I had escaped all danger of being recognized by him. Oh! the dread and the suspense of those long, long days with the wagon-train, when I lived in such constant apprehension. How I felt such relief as only a pardoned convict can feel when he left us to the care of his substitute! And yet it may be that he would not hate and despise me! But no—how could it be otherwise with him? And I will run no such risk. I am Placide Houston, a childless widow, and I will maintain it—ay, even though Clayton should recognize and call me by name! Why should I be tortured any longer—I, who did no wrong to any one? Even now I might accept the love of a good and true man, Ralph Kingsley, and rejoice in his protection for all time to come. But I would have to tell the poor boy of—that other! I will not call his name; and then even he—Ralph, fond and faithful as he is—might despise me. It is hard, very hard; but I must live out my appointed time. I have not sought revenge, nor do I seek it now. And yet, why am I now going on this mad journey to San Antonio, tearing myself away from those who love and trust me? I cannot tell—I know not what fate it is that impels me, or what may be in store for me when I reach there.

"Can Clayton be on his way thither also? Oh, surely I am not to be called upon to encounter that! Ought I to run such a risk? I will not do it. I will return, or go somewhere. I will brave the known and unknown dangers of the prairies, but I will not brave discovery after these three peaceful years!"

This wild and maddening train of thought was Placide pursuing, so unlike the self-control and firmness that had become second nature with her, and in spite of an instinct that had always told her how unprofitable it was; for in her calm moments she well knew that nothing could now turn her from the way she was going, and that, were she even to decide on turning her back at the last moment upon San Antonio, to rejoin her friends on the distant Frio would be simply impossible.

Since their wanderings had begun, from the very day that with the Kingsleys she left the green waters of Matagorda to the east, Placide had loved beyond all things these drowsy early mornings upon the prairies, the dewy grass and the sun's glorious passage above the hills. But when the new day dawned in the full glory of its hazy tropical splendor, sleepless as she had been through the night that was past, she felt no desire, for the first time, to enter with zest upon the awakened life which it brought.

A sense of languor and depression was weighing upon her, of which she had never before, in these latter and better days of hers, been conscious. The air had a lulling stillness, and she tried to persuade herself that this it was which depressed her and weakened her nerves; for in all previous miseries of her short and troubled existence, she had been able, by her innate force of character, to rise above them.

But the question that now haunted her was one which affected the near future. What was before her?

"Yer don't seem ter feel es peart es yer

gin'rally does," was the remark of Bristow, when the trio were well started on the trail. "I reckon, Mis' Houston, yer tuck a leetle too long a canter when yer started from camp yest'day. Hit hain't well mos'y ter overdo things, an' I reckons hit got overdid this hitch. Fact, yer ain't lookin' lively."

"And I don't feel so, to tell the truth, Mr. Bristow," was the reply; "but I am not unwell. I was a little nervous last night—something unusual with me, I am glad to say—and did not get my usual rest. That is the only trouble. But this fresh breezy air on the prairie will put me all right in a little time."

"I reckon hit air boun' ter, fer a fact," said the scout. "Tbar hain't nuthin' ter ekil hit fer buildin' up shattered constertutions."

"Do you speak from experience?" inquired young Carter, with a laugh.

"Nary time, pard," was Bristow's answer; "I hasn't caught myself in thet condition till yit, an' I reckon hit won't be the case, lessen some o' ther rads goes fer me too lively."

"I hope not," said the lady; "and I trust also that I am in no immediate danger of breaking down."

"Not much, I don't reckon," was the encouraging reply of the scout.

The day, brightened though it was by the beauties of the earth and the glories of the sky, was a long one to Placide Houston, filled as she was with this new and nameless dread—the longest she had known in years. Night would come of course, and did; but she, who had once loved darkness and solitude, now shrank from it. Her brain was cruelly active, in spite of her exhausted frame and the sleepless night through which she had passed. And active she felt it would continue. In this state there cou'd be no sleep for her.

She longed for the light of another morning, feeling that she would greet it gladly when it came; although it would, almost inevitably, bring her new suffering.

But anything was better than the long, dreary, dark hours, when shadows of coming events, which to her agonized mind, were teeming with evil, flitted around her head. The clear and cloudless sky withheld the comfort which, now and then, it sends down into a mind diseased. Even the bright stars failed to furnish a mild object for contemplation through those weary hours, and solitude had become an anguish greater than hunger, and thirst, and sleeplessness combined could have been, because it was so filled with fears for the future.

Had the brave spirit of this woman, who had so long suffered in silence, given way? Surely, if these terrors were becoming unendurable in the open air, and under the direct eye of an all-protecting omnipotence, it would, in confinement and seclusion, be too much for both brain and body.

But, long though she might to lengthen out the day and the sunlight, gradually it faded out, and the shadows would begin to come, not in battalions, but in single file, as if they were preparing the victim, whom they would torture, for their terrible possession of her, by degrees.

Thus it was throughout the entire remainder of the journey, until the goal to which they hastened, and for which Placide had so longed, was reached at last.

Not even then did her gloomy apprehensions forsake her. At the first sight of the quaint Moorish architecture, so new to her, of the low adobe buildings in the Spanish quarter of the town, the cry that arose in the wearied, tortured soul, was not one of thankfulness that the toil was over, but the self-reproaching question which she felt she could not answer:

"Why, oh, why have I come?"

CHAPTER XXV.

PAR NOBILE FRATRUM.

In a private room of the Menger House in San Antonio, sat two men, engaged apparently in discussing plans of a somewhat serious nature.

The older of the two, now considerably past forty, was one who, notwithstanding his careless, uncouth appearance, and uncultivated address, had been but a few years before, holding an honored position in the service of his country. He was an ex-army officer, whose wild life had been continually running him in debt, until after several decidedly reprehensible efforts "to raise the wind"—some of which remained undiscovered, and the others were

lightly passed over—he, one night, in desperation, and probably crazed with whisky, discarded his uniform, joined some kindred spirits, and attacked and robbed the relief train of the paymaster's funds for paying off the troops.

Although the crime was not conclusively proven against him, there were numerous other charges in the indictment, and sufficient of them were established to cause his dismissal from the service.

The next known of him, by those who took the trouble to watch his downward career, was as a solitary road-agent, lying in wait for the overland stages, and alone and single-handed attacking driver and passengers.

The general appearance of the outlaw, and the fact of his being without any one to aid him, had given rise to the impression that he was a lunatic; but if so, there was considerable method in his madness, for, about the time of the commencement of this narrative, guards had begun going with the stages, and the dreaded monarch of the roads had suddenly disappeared.

Although there was a price on his head, he appeared to be little, if any, apprehensive on the subject; for, with but slight attempt at a disguise, he appeared a few weeks later on the plazas of the Alamo City. There could be no doubt as to the plans and intentions of the mad road-agent, as he was called. He had made up his mind to organize a band, of which he was to be the head, and which would be too strong for any forces which the border would be likely to bring against them.

For the composition of such a gang not only desperate men were needed, but men of deep cunning and strategy, and such Mad Morrow believed he had found in the rather elegant and *distingué* looking individual with whom he was now negotiating.

In spite of a decidedly dissipated look, Steve Harrington—for by that name was the road-agent's companion known in San Antonio, which, by the way, he had visited more than once in his lifetime—was rather handsome, although a somewhat unnatural appearance, caused by a dyed mustache and eyebrows that were evidently corked, gave one the impression that he was now under an *alias*. Be that as it may, he called himself Harrington at the Bull's Head, where on former occasions he had been noted for his large winnings at the classic game of draw poker, and the register of the Menger bore the bold signature of "S. W. Harrington," hailing from the Crescent City, as before.

The loss of more than one emigrant train lately had been a grieved disappointment to Mad Morrow, he having been obliged to keep "shady." Averse, as he had always been since taking to the road, to sharing the booty with others, he would have been more than glad to have had his band organized a month previous, when more than one tempting train was crossing the prairie in the direction of the Rio Frio.

"You were born and raised in Louisiana, you say?" was the query of the road-agent as he drained a full glass of some fiery liquid which the pair had been discussing.

"Just so. In New Orleans," was the reply.

"And you've been for the last four years in Texas, didn't you say?"

"Four all told; in different parts of the State."

"Honest, now, pard, what special piece of deviltry did you commit before leaving the land of pelicans and orange blossoms?"

"Nothing, of course," said Harrington, but with some show of hesitancy. "I wanted to see life; tired, you know, of being cooped up—"

"I see. Not room enough for a sprightly youth like you in New Orleans?"

"Well, you know, pard—"

"Yes, I know. Steve Harrington, you committed some crime which caused you to fly for your life; I know that as well as I want to know it. You might just as well own up. Honor bright!"

"Well, if you must know it, it was a girl—"

"Of course. And you didn't marry her?"

"You are off your eggs there. It is just what I did."

"You must have been a soft one in those days. And you have been afraid ever since of her following you up?"

"Not the slightest danger of that," said this worthy; "the Red River isn't much noted for resurrecting its dead."

"A cool hand you must have been, for a amateur. Was there no other way?"

"Not when a man is followed up and cornered, and his whole life about to be made a curse to him. What else could I do?"

"As to that," remarked Mad Morrow, with a sardonic grin, "you don't seem to have made much else out of it. But it wasn't a bad beginning—for you. I'm inclined to think already, that you're the man for the road. And what pious line of biz have you been principally engaged in since that memorable epoch? Paste boards?"

"You're right, pard. A pretty steady profession—"

"But not uniformly successful, I reckon?"

"Tolerably so," was the reply. "I generally contrived to hold my own."

"But, like your days of early piety in the Crescent City, you didn't find the life sufficiently exciting, eh?"

"A little too much so toward the last," said Harrington; "that is why I thought of a new deal."

"So you got in a tight place, did you?"

"Yes; or rather I got out of one."

"As you did before, I suppose? Cut the Gordian Knot with a love-nife?"

"Something of the sort," said the other, carelessly.

"Where was this?" inquired the mad road-agent.

"Down on the Brazos," was the response.

"I reckon we can strike hands, pard," said his companion, after a pause; "you'll do. If you say so, we'll go in for a life-long partnership. I know that will suit you."

"I don't know so well about that," said the pious Steve. "Like nearly everybody else in the world, I reckon, I have my own plans for winding up the business."

"Oh, you have?" Mad Morrow had just the slightest approach to a sneer on his bearded lip as he spoke.

"Why not?" exclaimed the other. "Why should I not, when I have secured a sufficiency to enable me to seek a foreign land, and there live in peace and comfort?"

"You are crazier than the fools about here say that I am, if you dream of such a thing," was the contemptuous reply. "I never went to that depth in 'dampoolism' yet. In comfort, you might; but in peace—never! Peace, indeed! With the specters of evil deeds, like yours and mine, rising grimly before us!"

"Don't you believe that a man can bury his past in the grave of forgetfulness?"

"Never!" cried Morrow, in a tone that almost startled his questioner. "There are memories and faces that will never remain buried. No priestly power can lay such ghosts; they are forever rising up before our eyes!"

As the speaker raised his voice to a high pitch, some one walking on the balcony involuntarily paused, and gave one glance within the room where the two men were seated.

It was a lady, who, from her dress had apparently just arrived, and was now on her way to her apartment. She passed on hurriedly, and without noticing any one in particular within the room, before the casement of which she had halted for a second. But it was sufficiently long to photograph her face—a pale, but royally beautiful one—upon the vision of one of the occupants of the apartment.

Steve Harrington turned pale, and the glass which he had been filling while Mad Morrow was speaking, and was just in the act of raising to his lips as the lady turned her face and glanced in his direction, fell from his hand.

"What the devil and Tom Walker!" was the exclamation of his comrade, noticing the ghastly look upon the ordinarily florid face of the gambler.

"A little spasm, that's all," said the latter in a husky voice.

"Then drink your brandy, why don't you?"

Harrington complied, still looking as pale as death. The road-agent was not deceived.

"Who was that piece of calico?" he asked.

"I don't know," was the answer, "I wish I did."

"You look a deuced sight more as if you wished you did not. Own up, wasn't it some one of that Brazos crowd, that you say you lit out from only the other day?"

"Not a bit of her," was the reply. "She reminds me of some one else; but I was mistaken."

"Dog'd if I believe you were!" said Morrow.

"For Heaven's sake, what do you mean?"

was the exclamation of Steve, now thoroughly alarmed.

"You know dog-goned well who that semi-nine is. That's what I mean."

"I don't—I swear I don't," was the reply. "The one whom she resembles has been dead for years. It was the likeness that startled me."

"The Red River one?" queried Mad Morrow.

"No!" said the gambler, shortly, as he swallowed a second glass of brandy.

"Your nerves don't seem to have the genuine wrought-iron tempering yet, pard," remarked the road-agent. "The sooner I get you out of this, the better. It's high time I was at work again anyway, and I don't reckon that you are feeling any too happy enjoying your quiet holiday."

Harrington made no reply; but Morrow was right, as he generally was, in his surmises.

The gambler was growing restive, and anxious to be upon the road. Having once decided upon the line he would adopt, he was restless and uneasy until he could set to work. Added to this, things had not gone on to suit him since his arrival in San Antonio. Just, pour passer le temps, he had taken up his old trade, for the last few days, and the luck had gone steadily against him. He had risked considerable on cards and lost; the fact was that a goodly pile of gold, which he had brought with him in his saddle-bags, had diminished until but a few pieces were now left.

Mad Morrow got up, expressing his intention of going and interviewing a recruit or two for his band, in another quarter of the town, and Harrington, first help'ng himself to another glass of his favorite Cognac, followed him down the stairway.

He halted in the office, however, and going up to the desk, glanced at the more recent entries on the ledger. Running over the last page, which was made up of masculine names, until he came to the foot, his countenance gave no sign of having made any discovery. The last name alone was a female one—"Mrs. Placide Houston, Corpus Christi, Texas."

"I am a fool!" muttered the gambler to himself as he turned away. Lighting a cigar, he passed out, and crossing the plaza, was soon seated in the Bull's Head.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TO WAIT FOR FATE.

RESTING at last!

In her quiet room in the best hostelry of the city sat Placide Houston, unable to fix her thoughts upon a single point in the dark, uncertain, and mysterious future which stretched out before her. She was young—so young!—and strong in body, and it seemed a long time to look forward to, the time when she could leave her weary life behind her.

After long days, and weeks of monotonous and fatiguing travel by day, and camping by night, the end of the tedious trail had been reached. After hopes and hardships, dangers and fears, the haven had been arrived at, and still the old question was ever uppermost:

"Why did I come?"

Poor Placide! It might have been vanity and folly in the beginning with her, for she was very young at the time; but it had been through no actual wrong-doing of hers that the door had been opened to a long train of evils that seemed likely to pursue her through the whole course of a life that was yet in its morning.

"I married at my own risk," she said bitterly, but resignedly. "I knew, child though I was, that it could not be all sunshine before me; but I loved him, and I chose to take the chances. I refused to be led or advised, and so far the fault was mine, and bitterly have I atoned for it. I dreamed not of weariness, loathing, and desertion; I trusted to what every one called my beauty to retain his affection for me; but the frail chain of fading flowers could not hold him, and we parted. Even then I had no fear of the horrors that were to follow. And now, what is left to me? How are my remaining days, be they long or short, to be spent? And why did I leave the peaceful shelter which might have continued to be mine until the end? I must have been mad when I made such a decision; but, whether or not, the first move in the blind, reckless game has been made, and I must continue to play it."

The little that she had made known of her history to the friends whom she had found in the first days of her misery, had secured for

her every kindness and consideration; and Placide Houston felt that she had not been guilty of obtaining them under false pretenses. Had she gone further, and told the whole truth she well knew that the deepest sympathy with an injured woman, the strongest indignation against the unprincipled wretch who had sacrificed her to his caprices, with sorrow that she should so have wrecked her bright and promising life, would have been hers. But she had shrunk from giving her whole confidence, even as she had turned away in assumed coldness from the manly love of Ralph Kingsley. She had been herself deceived—oh, so sadly!—but she would not deceive him.

To have seen and known Ralph Kingsley in these days, one would scarcely have inferred that his avowal of love had been silenced ere it reached his lips, from the patience with which he seemed determined to work and wait. And it is love such as his, deep, enduring and unselfish, that is the only love on which it is ever safe for a woman to build her enchanted castles of future happiness.

As Placide Houston, given up to her boding thoughts, looked listlessly over toward the plaza where crowds of idlers were sitting, and others pacing up and down the streets in the clear moonlight, the thought came into her mind that she could not be one of them; that she no longer had any interest either in the drones or the working bees that made up this human hive.

The music of a band, playing a delicious Strauss waltz, was floating over them, between the busy, agitated earth and the distant, pure and steady stars. To them, Placide turned her gaze, as they shone unswervingly in the calm, blue ether; and with a wild, unspoken cry, from the suffering depths of her silent spirit, she longed to be in those distant worlds, away from the one which, with all its remaining Eden glories, sin had so cursed.

Fear, and dread, and horror, of something, she knew not what, was upon her. It hung about her, like the shadow of some new and nameless evil—a formless shape of a huge, unseen, approaching ill.

And if new dangers were crowding upon her, and she had been driven into the very midst of them by some relentless fate, which way could she turn? With no friend near, not one person who knew her antecedents, she was powerless. She could see no ray of light in the gloom that threatened to enshroud her.

Firm and self-controlled as she had schooled herself to become, all that had forsaken her now. Her large dark eyes were strangely dilated, and her pure, calm face seemed gradually growing whiter. Terror and aversion were painted upon it, like shadows of distorted demons thrown by some phantasmagoria upon a whitened screen in the darkness. If the danger that she dreaded had descended at this moment upon her, she could not have uttered a word.

Pale as a statue of Despair, she sat until the long watches of the night were past. A few days only—but it seemed years to her—since she had left the only home and friends she had known since she had left the shelter of her father's roof. There she had found rest and peace, after more of anguish and strife than is often crowded into the allotted period; and now was the dread battle, in some other form, to be fought over again?

But the wretched night came to a close, as had all her previous ones, and the miserable woman had at last fallen into a heavy sleep. Peace, the gentle dove that seemed to have flown afar, returned at length for the time, and no terrors for the days that were to come visited her pillow; no thoughts of the anguished trail which she had followed since she had trusted and been betrayed; since she fled from the safe refuge of her happy girlhood to the protection of a heartless villain!

The sun was shining brightly into her chamber when she awoke, and on the floor below, all was bustle and business, for new arrivals had been pouring in while she slept. Conspicuous among the names recorded in the long roster of the Menger House the night before, were those of Charles Clarke and Graeme Leighton, the scout.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE BOY PARD.

BRISTOW, the scout to whom the youth Colt Carter had attached himself, and who had taken under his protection, as far as San Antonio, the lady who had so mysteriously claimed

it when she decided on abandoning the emigrant train and her friends, found himself in demand when he reached the Alamo City. His fame as a guide had preceded him, and several parties were awaiting his arrival, having understood from some old pards of his that he might be looked for almost any day. So it was that, on awaking the first morning he reached his destination, he found himself famous.

But our friend Bristow had no idea of starting on any trail immediately, so his would-be patrons were obliged to wait, or seek the services of some other guide, which latter alternative they had no thought of accepting.

Colt, for his part, was decided that he must remain in town for some days, and after that he would be only too willing to follow the fortunes of his friend, as a knowledge of prairie-craft was what he declared himself anxious to obtain. He was, therefore, anything but displeased when Bristow made known his determination, as it exactly coincided with his own wishes.

Meanwhile the youth attracted general attention by his unusual appearance; and, especially was this the case with a party of tourists from the East who were frequently in conversation with the scout in regard to their projected buffalo hunt.

"By Jove! That's the handsomest boy I've seen in a month of Sundays. Where did you pick him up, Bristow?" inquired one of the older gentlemen of the party.

"I hasn't seen nuthin' like him in a coon's age myself, I don't reckon," said the scout. "As ter pickin' him up, hit war this-a-ways. Ther bute air kinder on the other leg, pard. Ther younker picked me up; ther war 'bout ther way o' things."

"Picked you up! What do you mean?"
"Bout what I ses—I gin'rally does—tuck a kinder sneakin' fancy ter ther cut o' my jib, I reckons. Folkses am mos'ly allers doin' hit, 'speshly ther weemin' folkses. Nice a lookin' piece o' caliker es yer ever see'd tuck me up same fashion on this hyer last trail. Hangin' out ter ther Menger till yit."

"Really? And that was the way this youngster came to join you, eh?"

"Leastways ef hit warn't, I hasn't no way o' countin' fer hit. Yey moughtn't think mebbe hit air a nat'ral state o' fairs, but es I said, hit air continerly a-happenin'."

"The boy reminds me," said the first speaker, "of the pages who followed the knights, or danced attendance upon their ladies, in the glorious, romantic old days of chivalry."

"I never saw any of the little animals," replied another; "but he is a deuced uncommonly nice-looking little bantam rooster. Not of much use, however, I fancy. I suppose the youth begged so hard to be allowed to accompany you, that you hadn't the heart to deny him. That was about the way of it, wasn't it, Bristow? And now he seems resolved, doesn't he, to keep up with you on this hunt of ours. Hanged if I know what to think about that!"

"Nor me, nother," said the scout. "Only jest this much, ef ther younker air sot outer goin' I doesn't lay out ter hender him. He bain't nobuddy, fur es I kin make out, what keers a copper durn what comes o' him, an' ther only chance what he sees ahead air ter gradoote in this hyer skule o' mine on ther perrarers, an' I 'lows I orter gr'n him a fa'r show."

"Good for you, old man!" exclaimed another of the tourists. "We don't every day meet with such disinterested philanthropy, for I can't call it anything else. The boy is bound to be more or less in your way, I should think."

"Don't be too certain in your own mind about all that disinterestedness," said the man who had first spoken. "It isn't well to analyze our motives at the best of times. Who knows what our friend here may have in view?"

"Own up, Bristow," said the former speaker; "doesn't the lad remind you of a young lady in whom you were once interested?"

"Never war troubled that-a-way wo'th a cent," said the imperturbable scout. "Nary one o' ther shemale sect ever got a hold o' the kine outer me. Hit air a mighty soft sort o' biz when hit strikes a man in his vealy days, an' hit air wuss still, in my 'pinion, when hit gits him arter he air more seasoned. 'Bout that time yer nat'rally 'spect more sense from a man, ef he hes managed ter keep ther wits what he was bornd with. No, pard; yer

can't come that outer me. The younker don't memorize me of ary soul, male er shemale, that I ever knowed, an' I bes a powerful habit o' recons'emberin' every pilgrim what I bes fell in with. He stan's plum alone!"

"Sui generis, eh?"

"Nary time! Thet ain't his handle. Hit air Carter—Colt Carter; an' fer a colt o' his age I don't reckon he kin be beat, fur es looks goes, in Bexar county."

Every word of this edifying conversation fell on the ears of the boy who sat on a bench a few yards behind them, reading an Eastern newspaper. When he first found the conversation turning upon himself, a deep flush mounted to his forehead, and he half rose, as though to leave the plaza. Then, as if chained to the spot, or resolved to know something which he felt he must know at any cost, he sat down again, burying his face in the newspaper.

He was indeed, as has already been said of him, a handsome youth, looking perhaps eighteen, but small for his age. He was slight and graceful, and his close-curling fair hair, small features, and expressive blue eyes, made him an object of attention whenever he left the hotel.

He had silver spurs on his boots, and wore blue leggings which were fringed and richly embroidered, and though he carried a knife and pistols in his belt, his air and manner were those of one who wore them not for possible use, but in a gay masquerade.

He had avowed an almost complete ignorance of the plains, when he had begged to be allowed to accompany Bristow. He now admitted a like deficiency in hunting, but declared his passion for a frontier life and his anxious desire to take his first lesson. And his friend, the scout, looked forward with pride to the opportunity presented him for grounding such an attractive pupil in prairie lore.

"Hit'll be an exercation to him, wo'th more'n all he'd be lieble ter git at one o' ther high-toned colleges in Kentuck, er that-a-ways, dog'd el hit won't, an' yer kin jist bet he'll hev a squar' show fer 'quirin' his perfession."

It must be confessed that some few misgivings seemed to strike the youth, after it was agreed that he was to accompany the party. It might or it might not have been fear, but whatever it was he seemed resolved to know all the possibilities in the case.

"I want to know, Bristow," he said, "if there is likely to be any danger in this excursion."

"How yer reckons, b'y, I knows anythin' 'bout hit myself!"

"But you have some idea. There may be, may there not?"

"Now, look-a-hyer, Colt," said the scout, laying his wiry, supple hand upon the lad's shoulder; "yer hain't skeered, that I knows, so I doesn't mind tellin' yer what mought be. As ter ther danger, when we gits out thar," pointing out toward the south-western horizon, "hit air es lieble es not ter be putty thick. Course, hit air some way 'head of us, an' we hain't a startin' fer some days, but hit moughn't be so fur away when we does git onther trail es m'bbe we thinks. Ther tracks o' them pesky reds is as thick 'bout fo' days' ride beyant, es ther huts o' ther perarer dogs. They is over thar, somehow," and he pointed again, in his indefinite way, toward what seemed a range of low hills, lying against the horizon, and shrouded in a purple haze born of the approaching Indian summer. "They is layin' fer us, just es like es not. They knows, drot their or'nary pictur's! the right smart o' pilgrims is de'd sartin ter be out on ther bunt this moon an' ther nex'. I reckon I'd orter tell these hyer gay roosters, an' gi'n 'em thar choice 'twixt losin' ther fun, and runnin' a putty fa'r show fer losin' thar ba'r."

"Indeed I think they ought to be told at once," said Colt, decidedly.

Left alone, the youth began to reflect upon the position in which he found himself. He had come to San Antonio on a business that was known only to himself, and which he admitted to himself, there was not more than one chance in a score of his accomplishing. All that would be left him then—and he had craved the opportunity for that—would be to accompany his kind though uncouth friend, on what, he did not disguise from him, might be a perilous trail.

He could not say that he wanted to die—he felt that he had something, a great deal to live for—but, even if he did it would not be a pleasant death to be scalped or tortured by In-

dians. The bare idea of such a fate made his very soul shrink with terror. His heart began to almost turn traitor to his purpose.

While Colt Carter sat puzzled and perplexed in mind as to what course he ought to pursue, he saw two men, in the garb of the frontier, but elegant and striking in appearance, coming along by the north wall of the old church-yard, and passing into the main plaza. As they came near where the youth sat, he buried his head still deeper in the folds of his newspaper, as if to avoid being seen and recognized, and when he next looked up, they were some distance from the bench on which he was seated.

A cry escaped the young man, and he sprung from the seat, as if to follow them. Then, he stood in his tracks, with the air of one transfixed, gazing after the retreating forms of the two strangers who were now passing out of the plaza. A moment's hesitation, and Colt Carter started to follow them.

He soon turned, however, for the twain, who had so startled him, were seen to enter the Bull's Head, and the youth seemed strangely reluctant to mingle with the loud and boisterous set who, even at that early hour, were making that noted resort of gamblers and fast men a little pandemonium.

Whether it was the proud air of the elder of the two men, a bronzed and muscular Apollo, "bearded like the pard," or the graceful, boyish swing of his equally handsome companion, did not appear. Colt returned to his seat on the plaza, and attempted to resume his paper, but in vain. How long he would have remained thus is uncertain; but, in a few minutes more, two others, whom we have already seen, crossed the plaza near him, and proceeded in the direction of the Menger House.

The former pair were Graeme Leighton and Charley Clarke; the latter were Mad Morrow and Steve Harrington.

As Colt Carter's eye fell upon the one we have last mentioned, he turned deadly pale, and seemed about to fall from the bench. He sat thus for a full minute. Then, recovering himself, he arose and walked off, like one in a dream, in the direction that his friend the scout had taken an hour before.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE SHADOWS CAST BEFORE.

"I CAN'T account for the feeling that has come over me, ever since we arrived in San Antonio."

It was Gallant Graeme who spoke, and the remark was addressed to Charley Clarke, as the two young men were seated in the room which they jointly occupied in the hotel.

"Whether it be contagious, or merely sympathetic, I must confess I have much the same sensation," said his companion.

"I would not own to a belief in presentiments," Graeme continued; "and I have never been in the least superstitious, but up to the present time I have always been able to shake off any gloomy feeling, and this is one for which I cannot in the least account."

"It is not an unusual feeling with me of late," said Clarke; "but I would never have suspected you of giving way to the blues."

"Nor do I," said the other; "and if this were nothing but the blues, or even the horrors, you would not catch me yielding to it, but I seem, ever since our arrival to have reached a crisis of some kind."

"Hoping for that, I joined you on this trail," said his pard. "It was only with the vague hope of encountering the miscreant who has blighted my life that I ran no little risk of my own personal safety in coming here. A crisis, such as you seem to apprehend, I would gladly welcome for my part. It will always find me prepared."

"And I," said his companion. "For the last four years I have sought this town at certain seasons when there was a probability of his being here, for the cowardly villain whose life has been a forfeit to my vengeance for so long. His visits have been differently timed, and on every occasion he has escaped me. Six months ago, he was here—so I have ascertained—and there does seem something more than a chance that he may turn up this time. But I find no trace of him thus far."

"And you think this gloomy apprehension of yours is a presentiment, and connect it with this scoundrel? By the way," a sudden thought seeming to strike Clarke, "I have never asked you the wretch's name."

"Cyrus Keene," was the reply. Then, as he fancied he saw a look of disappointment on Clarke's face, he asked:

"Why? Did you suppose he might be the same villain of whom you are in search?"

"That idea did occur to me," he replied.

"It is strange," Graeme went on, "the nearer we drew to our destination, the deeper this unaccountable and inexplicable feeling came over me, and now it seems absorbed into my very being. Call me a fool, if you like, Charley, but 'coming events cast their shadows before.'"

"Are you certain that you would know this Keene were you to meet him? He may have a dozen names, and as many disguises."

"I would know the cowardly assassin were I to meet him in Hades," said the scout, in the fiercest tone he had yet used.

Gallant Graeme was well known on the border, as a man whose nature was utterly fearless, with a self-reliance that was most remarkable, and a carelessness of consequences that went almost the length of recklessness. Here, in San Antonio, he seemed to have changed completely. He had grown apparently fearful of some new evil which he was unable to ward off, and he appeared to have no confidence in his being equal to any emergency that might offer. Was it hope deferred—the fearful hope of deadly vengeance—that had thus deprived the patient watcher for it, of the nerve and brain that might be required to carry it out?

"To think of dying now, Clarke, and the work to which I had devoted my life unperformed! I cannot die and leave it so. I could not rest in my grave!"

"Let us hope there is no danger of anythig of the kind," said his comrade. "You must shake off these gloomy forebodings, and rise above them. Such a villain as this Keene can never die peacefully in his bed."

"But to fall by any other hand than mine? There is the rub, Charley. I tell you, there is no justice in Heaven or on earth if such a wretch meets his fate at the hands of another!"

"Such is my own feeling in regard to the dastardly murderer whose trail I am in search of. But, in addition, I have to wring a confession from his black heart. Think how it would be with me, should I be fated to be disappointed. But I will not—I must not be!"

Charley Clarke, young, ardent and confiding, had become attached to the man whose acquaintance he had made so informally, and that in the darkest hours of his life.

It would be impossible to describe the new life which the presence and the companionship of Graeme Leighton had brought to his grateful friend and admirer. He was indeed one of those happily-constituted mortals who, able to keep their own troubles and anxieties to themselves, brighten every scene of which they form a part. There was a magnetism in his mere step which brought change, variety, relief from monotony, forgetfulness of self and unpleasing surroundings, to which but few could have remained insensible.

The river of Charles Clarke's young life had flowed but slowly of late, it was becoming fast-bound by bideous chills, but when this torrent of healthful existence, warm and strong, met his own, the stream gradually became once more in flood. He had been inclined to be confidential with Graeme. He had hovered about the edge of the secret, the merest outline of which he had confided to him, and drawing back, more perhaps from youthful shyness than from want of faith in his friend.

They had known each other so short a time, he argued; Graeme might think it not only weak, but presuming in him to thrust his confidences where they were not sought.

But a change had come now, for a change had come over Graeme Leighton.

Young Clarke had time for sad meditations that evening, for his pard, having announced his intention of trying the efficacy of another visit to the Bull's Head in dispelling the gloom that had taken possession of him, had gone out, giving no hint that he desired his company.

It made Charley—little more than a boy as he was—sadder still to see the one friend that he possessed go out in such a mood, and the consciousness that he was no longer at hand to exchange a word with raised for the moment another cloud upon his horizon. It was an exhilaration merely to speak to him. It would have been almost happiness, he began to think, to have shared his secret with him.

True, he might not have been able to give him

any very valuable advice. In circumstances such as his, there could be very little advice that would be practicable. But Graeme would have understood him more thoroughly, and that of itself is a great matter."

He knew so much better what to do—so it had impressed the young man—than any one else whom he had ever known. To talk over, sitting here by themselves, the great horror of his life, would have gone far toward quieting him in the nervous dread which had taken possession of him, as well as of his friend.

It had grown dark in the room, but the minutes passed, and the young man took no notice of it. His thoughts were in the past—not such a very distant past to be sure, but it seemed ages to him—and he noted nothing that pertained to the present time and sense.

No sound of an entering footstep had caught his ear, usually so acute, but some sense of another living creature in the room, some subtle consciousness, with which the atmosphere seems sometimes to penetrate itself, of a living, thinking personality within it, reached him before a word was spoken.

He turned his head in the darkness, and saw Graeme Leighton.

"Is your name Adler?"

"My God!" Clarke started from the chair in which he had been dreaming of his wretched past, and his voice sounded hollow and unnatural.

"Is your name Adler?" his friend repeated, in the same tone as before.

"Charles Clarke Adler," he said. "Tell me, are they in search of me?"

"They! Whom do you mean?"

"I will tell you everything, Graeme."

"You need not. I know everything," was the reply of the scout.

"Then the bloodhounds are upon my trail!" and the young man darted toward the door, as if to fly from the house.

"Come back, Charley! Sit down again. You have nothing to fear of that sort. I will tell you what I know and how it has come about that I know it."

The terrified youth sat down mechanically, and the scout took a seat near him, the apartment still as dark as Erebus.

"Your home is, or was," so he began, "upon the Brazos. You are the only son of your mother, and she a widow. The adjoining plantation was owned by a gentleman named Carbury, the father of two children—a son and a daughter. You, Charles Adler, fell in love, as boys will do, with this young lady. Your suit, it would appear, did not meet with encouragement from the lady's family. The end of it was that you were forced into a hostile meeting with the brother. A gambling friend of his, who had a grudge of some kind against young Carbury, whom he had previously well-nigh ruined, was concealed near at hand when the moonlight meeting took place. Seeing his opportunity, for he considered you a rival, and wished to get you as well as young Carbury out of his way, the moment that you shot your pistol above your head he aimed at the brother, killing him, and the ball glancing, wounding, if not killing the young lady also, who had suddenly appeared upon the scene."

"Does it tally so far?"

"It does. But she—Cora Carbury was not killed."

"That, at least, was well. But there is more. In making his escape, it seems it became necessary for this precious scoundrel to make way with a negro man, the hostler at the Carbury plantation—"

"Poor old Uncle Ben!" exclaimed Charles.

"He killed him; and, having found a handkerchief of yours near the spot where he had lain concealed, left it beside the body of the murdered negro, the more surely to fix the double crime upon yourself."

"Good heavens! My conviction was indeed certain," the young man said, bitterly.

"It was; for knowing that the bounds would soon be on your trail, the assassin went from the Carbury stables to those on the Adler plantation, thus leading them in that direction. Near that point he struck a stream, which he crossed by swimming, thus putting the dogs off the scent, and leaving it beyond the shadow of a doubt that you had murdered both the master and the slave."

"And this is known in San Antonio?"

"It is known to me," was the reply.

"But how, tell me, Graeme, how you know this? Is it known that I am here?"

"One question at a time, Charley. I know it from being an invisible listener just now to the confession which the assassin himself was making, as coolly as you please, to a pard of his."

"He is here then?"

"He is here, and his name is Harrington—Steve Harrington."

"No, you mistake. It is Hank Roberts!"

"He goes by the name I have told you," said Graeme, "though I never saw the man; and he is registered as S. W. Harrington here at the Menger House."

CHAPTER XXIX.

WALLS HAVE EARS.

The scout had indeed heard everything just as he narrated it to the astonished Charles Adler. Hank Roberts and Steve Harrington were one and the same.

After supper this last-mentioned worthy, having gotten himself up in the costume which he affected when about to honor the gaming-table with his presence and patronage, had adjourned to his favorite resort, the Bull's Head.

He had completed the arrangements begun that morning with Mad Morrow, the road-agent, and had chosen his future career.

This masquerade, such as it was, might be considered his adieu to the last feeble pretense of respectability.

The face of the man, when in repose, was a study. His features were finely chiseled, his brow bold and marked with undoubted intellect, and his eyes bright and expressive; but over them all rested a mask of ungoverned passions, and their beauty was marred by dissipation and indulgence in the vilest passions.

He had attired himself for the evening in a well-fitting suit of blue cloth, stylishly made, and ornamented with brass buttons, which gave him the look of one in command; but the buttons bore no device upon them to designate that their wearer belonged to either army or navy. His hat was a black slouch, encircled by a gilt cord, and under his coat was visible a belt of arms.

Steve Harrington, or Hank Roberts, as we may now call him—he had the same right to one name as the other—met an old acquaintance, who had also that day enlisted in the corps of Mad Morrow. After an hour or so spent in the Bull's Head, they went out together to seek for more privacy than that noted resort afforded, and in which they might talk over their prospects in the new career on which they were about to enter. Hank's present companion presented so decidedly suspicious an appearance that he did not wish to invite him to his room in the Menger, so the delectable pair sought a seat under the shadow of the high church-yard wall near the main plaza, and there discussed their pious plans.

Graeme Leighton, on leaving his apartment, had proceeded direct to the Bull's Head, but finding nothing there sufficiently exciting to disperse the blue devils that had taken possession of him, and meeting no one whom he knew, he sauntered out, and after strolling around the plazas for some time, at last seated himself on a bench, and finally stretched himself at full length upon it. In this position he was not observed by the two men, who, coming up a little later, and perceiving no one in the vicinity, took possession of a bench not many yards from the one on which he lay.

From talking over their schemes for the future, of which Graeme made a note and resolved to profit by, they turned to some reminiscences of the past. A story told by Hank's companion of the crime which had led to his fleeing from civilization, brought out in turn the narrative to which the scout was an attentive listener. He was not long in identifying his friend Charley Clarke with the Charles Adler who had been the victim of the dastardly assassin's black-hearted villainy.

"Was the young tender-foot nabbed?" inquired Hank's pard.

"Seems not," was the reply of that worthy; "and it's devilish queer how the deuced spoony ever managed to escape. But, escape he did, as I saw by a long account of it in the papers after I came here. That ain't all of it, though, for they've got an idea, from the lay of things, that there must have been two engaged in the shooting."

"They don't suspect—" began the other.

"Me," said Hank. "I reckon not. Don't see how they could. The old darky was the only human who knew of my being on the plantation, and I settled his hash."

"You ran a d—l of a risk," said the other.

"Bet yer life, I did. And that's just what yours truly don't intend to run any more. I've been in a tight place more than once in my life, and though I've managed to run the gantlet, that is the part of the biz that isn't exactly to my taste. This high-toned civilization don't suit me any longer. If I had money enough to go in and enjoy it among the heavy swells, it would be another matter. And that is what I intend trying for now. The cards have gone against me like the deuce since I've been in San Antonio—fact is, the bloods around here are up to all my little tricks—and the only show I see for making my pile is on the road."

"My mind's made up on that question the same way," responded his pard.

"Oh, you?" There was just a little contempt in the voice of the high-toned Hank, as he spoke. "You never was exactly cut out for shining in ladies' society and all that sort of thing. Now, I'm just in my element there."

"So you'll be thinking of gittin' back to it one of these days, I reckon?"

"You can gamble on that, pard. Just as soon as I make my pile, no more Captain Morrow and the road for yours truly."

"I don't know after all, Steve. You see it's a mighty excitin' life."

"Too deucedly exciting sometimes," said Hank, whose bravery was not his strong point.

"And there's a kinder fascination about it," the other continued.

"There is, about the money that is to be made at it. I know that well enough."

"As far as the danger goes, there's that in most anything. There's danger in layin' round loose in this way."

"That there is!" muttered Graeme under his breath.

"When I made up my mind to take the road, I settled onto it for a steady profession. And I reckon I'll stick to it as long as it sticks to me. They may drive us off some day, but 'tain't likely 'twill be in your day or mine."

"All I'm sorry for now is," said Hank, "that I didn't take to it long ago. All I've made in a quiet genteel way, has slipped out of my fingers—tely in the slickest way you ever dreamed of. It's deuced odd; I swear it is. And after all the infernal risk I ran into the bargain. If I had gone on the road four years ago, when I left Louisiana, I wouldn't call the I'President my un-le to-day."

"You'd be about thinking of retiring from the business, I reckon?"

"You bet I would! You'd have seen me about this, if you had happened to have gone East, a full-blown bloated aristocrat."

"Dog'd if 'tain't likely enough," said Hank's admiring auditor.

"It's just as sure as anything in the world can be. But I'll make the rifle yet, you can just bet your boots."

"I think myself it's about the shortest road to a fortun', without it may be marrying a rich widder; and then you don't have no incumbrances."

"Of course you don't. And, let me tell you nothing of that kind would go down with me. I was fool enough to tie myself to a piece of calico once—"

"The dickens, you say! I didn't never know about that. How long ago was it?"

"Never mind that. Who said you knew anything about it? I got a divorce from the beauty in a way of my own, short meter, I can tell you that."

"But the idee of your ever bein' married, Harrington—that's what gits me!"

Graeme had listened intently throughout that he might find out, if possible, the name of the man whom he now believed to be the one for whom his friend Clarke was searching. He had now made the discovery for which he had waited. The companion of the self-confessed assassin had accosted him as "Steve," and "Harrington."

But the scout was unable to leave his recumbent position while the pair of prospective road-agents remained. It would be manifestly unsafe to let them know of his proximity, and besides it might cause the scoundrels to levant, and thus interfere with the carrying out of the one great wish of his friend. So Graeme had still to possess his soul in patience.

Presently, however, a proposal was made to return to the Bull's Head, to which the other acceded, with the remark that he could not

remain long as he wished to return early to the Menger House, and retire. They then arose and strolled off together.

Graeme Leighton had heard sufficient. He sprung from the bench, and darted off for his hotel, stopping in the office when he reached it only long enough to inspect the register, and find, among the arrivals of some two weeks previous, the name of S. W. Harrington.

Then, without a word to any one he went quietly up to the room in which he had left his friend Clarke an hour before, to startle that young man as we have seen by asking him if his name was Charles Adler.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE PATHS CONVERGE.

We left Colt Carter rushing frantically from the plaza in search of the scout Bristow, after he had been so startled by the sudden appearance of Mad Morrow and Steve Harrington. The sight of Gallant Graeme and Charley Clarke had had the effect of almost paralyzing the youth, but this last seemed at once to electrify him.

He was not successful, however, in finding his friend; for Bristow, on leaving Colt, had gone off with the party of New Yorkers to inspect their horses, and they had together taken a canter out into the country from which they had not yet returned. Unable to decide on what course he ought to pursue in this evidently disturbing element into which he had been so suddenly thrown, Colt Carter roamed listlessly about the outskirts of the town until the sun had sunk beneath the horizon and the brief twilight which followed had disappeared also, before he returned to the hotel.

The conduct of the boy made it apparent that he feared, by himself, to meet whichever of the two men it was that had so disconcerted him.

Equally unsuccessful in coming up with the man whom they had identified as Hank Roberts, were Graeme and Charles Adler.

Together they went at once, both well armed, to the Bull's Head, only to find that while his pard was still there, the man known as Steve Harrington had left some minutes before. Returning immediately to the Menger House, they found that he had not yet put in an appearance.

The hour was still early, however, and they must make up their minds to wait, perhaps until long past midnight. It would be a tedious vigil for Charles Adler, if it must be so; and the patience, which for weeks past he had been seeking to acquire, was fast oozing out.

There were more nervous and excited watchers in that noted hostelry of the Alamo City on that eventful night.

Colt Carter, in a state of mind akin to frenzy, roamed the halls and passages, peering from time to time out into the darkness, for the counsel and succor in his mysterious trouble which could now only come with the advent of his friend Bristow.

And, on the floor above, in the pleasantest room of the hotel, a woman had been pacing the floor for hours, her long train rustling after her as she moved, like the sound of the ebbing waves upon the beach. Her face was strangely beautiful, but strangely sad; with her blue-black hair braided in heavy coils, her glorious dark eyes with their long fringing lashes, her delicately shaded and arched eyebrows, and her perfect mouth with its setting of pearly teeth.

We have seen her before, with the Kingsleys in the emigrant train, and we have witnessed her flight in terror from the presence of Gallant Graeme in the timber motte. We know too, the horror, nameless though it was, which of late had possessed her, and her conviction that fate was leading, or rather driving her on, in this visit of hers to San Antonio.

Now, as she moves up and down the floor of her apartment with graceful tread, her brows are drawn together in deep and anxious thought, and her lips move in low, painful accents:

"It may be that he is here—here, in this very house! Can it be that it is through him this nameless something which I so dread, is to come? Oh, Clayton, Clayton! Ever kind and good! Has it come to this that the one terror of my sad life is in meeting with you? I feel that I ought to act in some way, but since I have been here something seems to be restrain-

ing me. I am helplessly chained in this very room! The thought of my sudden helplessness, and the dread of the danger that seems to threaten me, are driving me mad. And yet, why should I? He would probably only despise me—me, whom he has long believed to be dead—he would scarce kill me. That I have already gone through, and from one at whose hand the stab was sharper than Clayton's could make it. Can it be that he—! But no, no! My God! No; anything, anything, in thy awful and mysterious dealings with me, but that!"

The tortured woman, even when she became calm, felt like a stranded sailor, like one shipwrecked on some island so thoroughly a desert that there was not even the consolation, the chance of struggling for life. She pondered over the many sad and fearful events which had been crowded into her little span of existence; she thought of all that had happened, and she wondered what remaining misery could be in store for her. The world in which her girlish footsteps had not been slow in finding out unaccustomed tracks, was one, the conditions of which even the keenest eyes are slow in discovering. She felt that she had crowded already into her two decades, more knowledge of its devious ways than many do in their three-score years and ten.

Meanwhile the patient watchers below—though the term by right belonged to but one of them—had begun conversing in a low tone, where they sat side by side in a shadowy corner of the rotunda. Graeme knew that in this way alone, could he stem the ebbing tide of his pard's patience, which was very much in the condition of the courage of Bob Acres.

"You can keep perfectly cool with the utmost impunity, Charley. The dastardly wretch cannot possibly escape us."

"He shall not escape me!" was the reply, with an energy in his tone and manner, which one who knew Charles Adler's life and character would not have looked for. "I am on his trail now, even should he have levanted while we are watching for him."

"That is not to be thought of," said his friend.

"How do we know? He may have heard something—seen me, possibly—and deemed discretion the better part of valor. He is a coward at heart, and will not meet me if he can avoid it."

"No doubt as to that, I reckon," said Graeme, "but he will return to the hotel. I have ascertained that his effects are here, and what money and jewelry he had left a couple of days ago, he placed on deposit with the clerk. He had been losing at cards pretty heavily, it appears, and probably wanted to make sure of having something left. Oh, he'll turn up; never fear."

"It is not so much the life of the miserable assassin—though that he has forfeited—that I thirst for. It is the proof of his guilt in the affair at Magnolia Plantation, and the testimony I must bring from him in attestation of my innocence."

"You forget, Alder, that I have all in my possession already. I heard the villain confess the whole affair, even to the smallest detail. As far as that is concerned, you might set out for your home to-night."

"I had not thought of that. Thanks, Graeme; I can be more patient now. At the worst, all will be not lost."

"Nothing will be lost, believe me; not even honor. But when this is settled, and you have returned to home, and duty, and beauty, my work still remains undone."

The scout spoke sadly, as if feeling that fortune favored every one but himself.

The hours passed slowly, and the witching noon of night had already passed. Silence began to reign in the corridors of the Menger, and sleep had fallen upon nearly all within its walls. Our two friends had drifted strangely upon a subject foreign to the one so important to them, and it was not until a new arrival had roused the drowsy clerk at the desk, that they were brought back to the present and its probable issues.

The sight of a solitary individual entering at that hour naturally made both men start from their chairs and clasp their hands to their pistols; but, even in that dim light, they were not slow in perceiving that the stranger was not the one for whose coming they waited.

He bore the appearance of anything rather than that of a fast man and a desperado, and the name which he inscribed upon the register, in a bold, manly hand, was Ralph Kingsley.

CHAPTER XXXI

ALL DEBTS SETTLED.

WITH the consciousness which came to young Adler from the assurance just given him by his friend that, let happen what might, his innocence was established, came a feeling of relief and thankfulness surpassing anything of which he had believed himself capable. He could bear all else. He could return and look all the world—ay, even Cora Carbury—in the face. James Carbury's death and that of poor old Uncle Ben might yet be destined to go unavenged; but, whether or not, the Adler name was unstained.

Instead of the culmination of human wretchedness, which had been the young man's condition ever since that fearful moment when he stood by the bleeding corpse of his assailant under the fair moonlight, came back into his soul that curious lull of enchantment which had been his but a few minutes before that fatal one.

The night breeze, which blew in through the open window near which he was seated, grew balmy and caressing, and every individual sound that came upon it ran into a symphony of happiness, and satisfaction, and peace.

There was no longer blood upon the air; that horrid vision which, sleeping or waking, had never been long absent from him, had vanished, and that by no mental process, but, as it were, by absorption of a new impression, which, in its turn, obliterated that which it replaced.

It had given softness to the air, melody to the breeze, and made even the stars above him shine with a new luster.

As for the scout, Gallant Graeme, he tipped his chair back against the wall and relapsed into gloomy silence. His thoughts went back to the adventure on the prairie of a few days previous—to the beautiful horsewoman who had fled from him, and whom he had in vain attempted to come up with.

"Strange that she should have been so shocked at meeting me face to face, the scout whom she must at once have recognized!" So the young man mused. "Stranger still," he went on, "that she should have so persistently avoided me while with the wagon train. There is a reason for it; of that I am positive. Either I am some one whom she knows, and whom for some reason she dreads meeting, or I resemble some one for whom she mistakes me."

"And she—she resembles no one I have ever met but one, and that one has for years filled the grave to which she was untimely sent beneath the muddy waters. Houston—yes, Mrs. Houston they called her—but the name proves nothing one way or the other. I feel, however, that I must find out something more in regard to her. When I am next on the Rio Frio I must make a point of calling upon Major Kingsley, and learn all that they may be able and willing to tell me. She must have had some reason of her own for leaving them in the way she did, and her appearance on the prairie, and alone, was, to say the least, very singular. Where could she have been going? Where, if not to San Antonio? And she may be here now."

Graeme Leighton, happily for him, was not one of those men like his friend Charles Adler, whose mind can become concentrated on one subject, to the exclusion of all else.

In the case of the latter, it was perhaps fortunate that it was so. Having, at the moment when the full horror of his position was forced upon him, been enabled to fix his purpose, and to set out at once on the task of accomplishing, the effort and the concentration of his whole mental powers had probably saved him from insanity. Even in the hours which were his darkest ones, when features of all the dreadful possibilities which life might yet hold in reserve for him, rose before his imagination, there was always sufficient hope in the labor he had undertaken to enable him to live.

It was not so, however, with Graeme. While the one great object to which he had devoted his life, namely, vengeance upon the betrayer and murderer of his sister, was never lost sight of, he had nevertheless the will and the strength to keep it in the back-ground; occupying himself, in the mean time, with his every-day duties on plain and prairie, and never betraying to the casual observer that he had "that within which passeth show."

Of late, however, the evil spirit which he had, up to this time, been able to keep under control, seemed to be acquiring the ascendancy, and but for the somewhat patronizing p

tion which he had assumed over his less-experienced friend, his state of mind would just now have been anything but enviable.

After keeping his attitude against the wall for some time, he started up abruptly, and remarking to his companion that he would return presently, went to his apartment.

He remained but a few minutes, and coming out, passed before reaching the head of the staircase the partly opened door of a room where the lights were still burning. As he did so, a half-suppressed scream from the inmate of the apartment caught his ear, but he made no pause, and descended at once to the office where he had left young Adler.

As he disappeared, the lady, whom we have seen pacing the room but a little while previous, came out, and stood in the passage, as if uncertain what she ought to do.

Her indecision lasted but a moment, for a pistol-shot and the sound of voices below were heard almost instantly, and she darted down the stairway and into the office.

Charles Adler had remained seated after Graeme had left him, his meditations of a more pleasant cast than they had been for some time, so much so that he did not observe the entrance of a man, who went up to the desk for the key of his apartment. As the newcomer turned, the eyes of the two men met, and the recognition was mutual. The stranger was too quick for Charles, however, and had covered him with his pistol before the young man had more than drawn his from his belt.

"My dear, Cyrus Keene!"

The voice startled him, and he turned. The next instant Graeme had discharged his pistol, and Hank Roberts fell to the floor.

"Cyrus Keene?" exclaimed Charles Adler, inquiringly, as he stepped toward him.

"Yes," was the calm reply of the scout.

"And you?" said the wounded man; "they call you Graeme Leighton."

"Clayton Graeme," was the response; "you know me now, I suppose?"

"My God!" was the exclamation of Hank, who had not attempted to rise. Then, after a pause. "But I am dying; so, what matter?"

"Yes, you are dying," said the scout, "and Annette Graeme is avenged at last."

"Yes," said the wretch, feebly, "but she was really my wife, Clayton. I had married her!"

"You had! Do you speak the truth?"

"For the last time, and almost the first," was the reply. Then, turning his eyes to Charles Adler, he said: "And I murdered Jim Carbury and old Ben!"

As he said these words his eyes rested upon the face of one who had now come forward, with others, on hearing the commotion in the office. It was Colt Carter. It was but one look, and they recognized each other.

"It is he! It is the eyes!" came in a scream of mingled joy and terror from the lips of the youth; and, as Charles Adler, with a curious look of perplexity turned and looked him in the face, he fell to the floor in a faint.

Clayton Graeme turned again to his prostrate foe, who had not spoken since the recognition of him by Colt Carter.

"He is dead!" he said, quietly.

At this moment Placide Houston came rushing into the office.

"He is dead!" she echoed, in a hollow voice.

"Dead! And I once called him husband!"

"And he was in truth your husband," said Graeme, catching her in his arms as he spoke. "Annette Keene, thank God, you were his wife! Thank God, ten thousand times, you are now his widow!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THROUGH NIGHT TO LIGHT.

CHARLES ADLER had barely had time to announce to his friend Clayton Graeme, that the youth, known as Colt Carter, was none other than Cora Carbury, the faithful, who had found, not only her unjustly accused lover, but the real assassin of her brother, the man whom she had seen and recognized as he lay crouched in the shrubbery—when the scout, Bristow, came in on the search for his young pard.

"Thet settles ther hunt, es fur es ther younker air consarned," was his remark, when the state of affairs was made known to him; "I reckon hit air ther only time what Bil. Bristow got fooled that-a-way. But I don't give a durn without them high-toned New York gerloots gits a grip onto ther romance o' hit."

If it comes ter that, I mought es well leave ther plains ter onc't. I'd be dead sure never ter hear the eend o' hit."

Ralph Kingsley was no less astonished, on finding that Placide Houston whom, with a true spirit of knight errantry, he had followed, hoping to aid and protect, was the deeply-injured wife of the gambler who had then and there met the fate he so richly deserved; and that she had found a protector in the person of the brother, the meeting with whom had been the one well-defined terror of her life.

It was mutually agreed that Annette Keene should rejoin her friends on the Rio, for the present, until her brother, having resolved to relinquish the life of a scout, should fix upon their future home; and, consequently she journeyed thither forthwith, under the joint protection of Clayton and Ralph.

That Annette, or Placide as they had known her, was warmly welcomed by the Kingsley family, may well be believed, and her brother found the location so attractive that he decided at once on making the future home in that neighborhood. The wish may have been rather to the thought, but Annette shrewdly suspected that the lovely and amiable Blondine Kingsley was the chief attraction.

The San Antonio papers which, at one time, had displayed such enterprise in writing up the Brass tragedy, were not slow in giving to their readers, a full account of the discovery and death of the assassin, and of his companion. In this way the now mortal Magnolia Plantation and Fair Oaks some time in advance of the returned fugitives.

Cora Carbury, under the protection of a family who were coming to the East, hastened to return to the lonely and grief-stricken old man, with the only intelligence that could be at all pleasing to him in this world.

Charles Adler remained behind for some days, having accidentally discovered that some unsettled claims of his late father were susceptible of being adjusted to the great advantage of the estate.

That his mother, haughty and self-contained though she was, rejoiced in her inmost heart when the welcome news reached the plantation none need question; but the most demonstrative of all the adherents of Charles Adler at Fair Oaks, was little Pomp, who had taken no interest in life since performing the one duty which his young master had enjoined upon him.

"I done gub de letter ter Aunt Huldy, Marse Charley!" was the little darky's exultant greeting, when, after some days, Charles Adler, mounted on Thunder Cloud, even as he had left, rode up to the stable at Fair Oaks.

Honest Phil Munroe, true to his young friend, through good and evil report, was the first to bear the tidings to Magnolia Plantation. It must be confessed that there was not a little of the ungenerous "I-told-you-so," spirit in the way in which he triumphantly imparted the welcome news.

"I allers said when they foun' the coward what killed Jim, thar wouldn't be much like ness o' Charley Adler 'bout him. I know a squar' man when I sees him, I reckon; and when I does, I freezes ter him."

Colonel Carbury's reply showed the last glimmer of the old feeling.

"I'm glad it wasn't young Adler after all. It was a bitter pill for me; the thought that Kenton Adler had gotten the best of me at last—that my boy should have met his death at the hands of his!"

But the colonel was failing rapidly. He lived to see his daughter return, and to welcome her with some little show of affection; without censuring her in the least, or even asking any questions.

The one remark which he made in reference to their great sorrow, was the same in substance that he had made to Phil Munroe:

"I'm thankful that, after all, it wasn't young Adler. I could never have rested quietly in my grave if it had been so."

A few weeks more and Lafayette Carbury was peacefully resting there, beside his meek and patient wife and his reckless and prodigal son; his own selfish and unreasonable temper and vindictive, unforgiving nature gradually softening toward the last.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"A KIND GOOD NIGHT TO ALL."

THE three fairest and happiest homes on the Rio Frio are occupied respectively by Major

Kingsley, his wife and daughter; Clayton Graeme and wife, the latter the pretty Blondine Kingsley; and Ralph Kingsley and his wife, Annette.

No dreams of further vengeance now haunt the pillow of our friend, Gallant Graeme, and not even the shadow of a longing for his former wild life on the plains, comes up to darken his domestic peace and contentment.

While with Annette, happy in her new love, and feeling secure in that of the fondest and most faithful of husbands, the sadness which clouded her earlier days has completely vanished, and the memory of Cyrus Keene is but as that of a nightmare which can never return to disturb the repose which is hers to day.

When Charles Adler once more approached his mother with the suggestion that they dispose of the plantation, that lady no longer offered the slightest objection. Her pride would not have permitted her to give the Carburys the satisfaction of seeing her compelled to give up her home—for in that light alone did she regard it—but, now that the colonel and his son were no more, her feelings in regard to them were allowed to sleep in their tomb. Besides, there were now ~~potential~~ associates connected with the neighborhood of Fair Oaks, which made her not unwilling to leave it.

Neither did Mrs. Adler, stranger still to say, interpose any obstacles to the marriage of her son and Cora Carbury.

Whether it was only because she deemed it wisest to submit to the inevitable, or that her bitter feelings had died with her old enemy, or possibly that the knowledge that Cora had inherited all that remained of the Carbury estate—no inconsiderable fortune, even in the condition in which James Carbury's prodigality had placed it—it is certain that Charles found his mother, to his great delight, even pleased with the prospect of thus finally, and for all time, burying the hatchet.

Nor did Adelaide Adler so much as suggest to her son, any location, or even part of the universe, which she would prefer. The old spirit of sovereignty and dictation had vanished, and she left the entire matter with him unquestioningly.

But in this, as he was desirous of doing in everything, Charles thought first of what he knew to be the dearest, though it was the unexpressed wish of his mother's heart.

In one of the brightest and bonniest of homes, in that paradise of the true Kentucky, the "Blue Grass Region"—one which for generations, had been owned and occupied by the Clarks, to which family Mrs. Adler so ~~prided~~ herself on belonging—Charles Adler brought his dignified and handsome mother, and his pretty and winsome wife.

With them too, went the servants of the Fair Oaks Plantation, and such of those from the Magnolias as had once belonged to it also; not forgetting the favorite attendants of Cora whom she wished to have accompany her, including, of course, old Aunt Huldy.

The latter, although her attachment to the place where she was born, and in which she had passed so many years, was, as one might expect, "cat-like," nevertheless refused to be parted from her young mistress.

Cora was all that was now left of the fast-faded glories of the Carburys, and the faithful old creature, who had but a short time to remain behind them, firmly and fondly clung to her.

There, in the old Kentucky home, we leave them, the bright sun of heaven shining lovingly upon their path, and the soft, southern breezes from the Gulf bringing with them no sounds but those of peace.

THE END.

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